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Grace and Holy Trinity Church
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The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of our Lord

Acts 10:34-43

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Welcome to the First Sunday after the Epiphany: the Baptism of our Lord...which is one of the great baptismal festivals of the church year...which we will mark by renewing our covenant.

The Christmas season ended last Thursday with the Feast of the Epiphany. Always on the First Sunday after the Epiphany, we read the story of Jesus' baptism. So we move from Christmas to Epiphany with this story.

We last met Jesus as an infant. At the he is perhaps 30 years old. Do you ever wonder what he had been doing? I do. The only other story we have is from Luke's gospel when Jesus was about twelve years old...you remember the story of when he goes to Jerusalem with his family and ends up staying behind?

We can assume he was working with his father, as a carpenter. Jesus took his place in the family, helped put food on the table. He must have done the kinds of things we all do, day to day. But why, when he turned 30, did he take that fateful step and go get baptized?

We can't know for sure. But I did find this interesting. In ancient Israel Kings could live into their late 40s, we know this from the lists we find in various places in the Old Testament. We read about people who lived phenomenally long, of course, but we are looking at averages, and late 40s seems to be it for royalty.

But the common person lived in harsher conditions and probably had a life expectancy of less than forty years. So at 30, Jesus was entering what typically would be the last decade his life.

But here's an interesting thing to know: anecdotal evidence indicates that while girls were typically married in their teens, sometimes early teens, men waited well into their twenties, sometimes thirties to get married.¹ I suspect that is so they could be financially capable of supporting a family.

So, Jesus had hit a point in his life where normally he would have gotten married. The celibate life was not a value in Israel. Getting married, having a family...that was the ideal.

But, instead of getting married, he makes his way to the Jordan River for a ceremony of a different sort. He is baptized and that event was the inaugural event for his public ministry. Jesus' baptism is a window that opens out to show us everything that he said and did.

You see, the baptism of John was for repentance, a change of mind, heart and life. That was not something Jesus as an individual had a need to do, but it was something the people as a whole needed to do. Jesus is baptized with and for his people. Jesus was not a separatist. He did not hold himself aloof. Winning for him was not finishing first...he defined winning as bringing everyone across the finish line. Every....last...person.

All of this, all of Jesus' ministry is there in the baptism in kernel form. And God's Spirit blesses this endeavor and empowers Jesus to carry out the meaning of his baptism...to carry it to its logical conclusion, which is...to the cross.

Peter's sermon from Acts capture this connection beautifully "You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear...to us who were chosen by God as witnesses... He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." Isn't that just a beautiful and succinct summary of the gospel?

And Peter prefaced those words by saying: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

What Peter, a Jewish man came to understand, a man whose identity prior to meeting Jesus was bound up in being part of a specific people, keeping separate...what Peter came to understand was that faith in Jesus is open to anyone anywhere. God shows no partiality.

There are some things you might want to join and they tell you, "Yes, you can join, if you have this amount of money." There are other things you might want to join where they say, "Yes, you can join, but only if you come from the right family." There are still other things you might want to join, where they say, "You can't join because you were born in the wrong place. Sorry."

The good news, the gospel is this – Christ fully identified with us. God blessed Christ Jesus, and through Christ he blesses us all. At his baptism, Jesus fully and freely identifies with humanity. And now through baptism, all humanity can fully and freely identify with God through Jesus. There are no bars to membership. Everyone can come to God through faith. And in Christ, and here is blessing on top of blessing on top of blessing...we are given each other.

In Christ there is no east or west, there is no north or south, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.

And yes...we know, don't we, that we live this poorly so much of the time? We divide and divide and divide...Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican, Free Church...for heaven's sake, even within our little denomination we divide...liberal, conservative, traditional, contemporary, high church, low church...

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http://books.google.com/books?id=OtOhypZz_pEC&pg=PA37&lpg=PA37&dq=life+expectancy+in+ancient+israel&source=bl&ots=k-Uosl8pnt&sig=ovVDvWsGM9UIoH0_8NSpJUHnYc4&hl=en&ei=kQgmTdPGDIL48AbP74ynAQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5&ved=0CDIQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=life%20expectancy%20in%20ancient%20israel&f=false

Today stands as a rebuke to all of that, as a call to repentance. God shows no partiality... in every nation, with people from every ethnicity and point of view, anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. And anyone who is acceptable to God had best be acceptable to us!

Now I know that as we gather this morning we do so in the face of some very sad and disturbing national news. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords has been shot point blank and is in critical condition. Six others have died. Eighteen people have been wounded.

At a press conference following the attack (which happened in Tuscon, AZ) the Pima County Sheriff, Clarence Dupnik blamed political vitriol for fueling the attack.²

I can't say if there is a direct connection, but I do know that we have lost our way. We dehumanize our elected leaders. We demonize those with whom we disagree.³ What passes for dialogue is thinly veiled demagoguery. And the vitriol and polarization in society is reflected in the church.

But surely, we are called to be signs and agents of unity, as members of Christ, are we not? Can we not live in a different way altogether? Because, dare I say it... "In Christ there is no Republican or Democrat, no liberal or conservative, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth." We can be the leaven for society as a whole. We can be salt. We can reflect God's light into this darkness. This is not a call to niceness or civility but a call to our baptismal vows.⁴ It is a call to faith.

Many years ago... a 30 year old Jewish male headed not for the altar to be married but down to the River to be baptized. And because he did that then... today, we have life. Because of Jesus, we have each other. Because of Jesus we have a mission, to tell the world that God shows no partiality. We have a mission of reconciliation. Because Jesus went to the River, this morning we can bring Mia Caroline to the river and there she joins Christ. There all of us renew our own vows. So let us gather at the River. Amen.

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jan/09/gabrielle-giffords-critical-condition-shooting-arizona> Dupnik also said: "People tend to pooh-pooh this business that we hear about all the vitriol we hear inflaming the American public by people who make a living doing that. That may be free speech – but there are consequences."

³ A blog by Diane Butler Bass provided inspiration. Cf. <http://blog.beliefnet.com/christianityfortherestofus/2011/01/congresswoman-gabrielle-giffords-speaking-for-the-soul.html>

⁴ *ibid*