

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Given January 8, 2012 at Grace and Holy Trinity Church, Richmond, Virginia
The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of our Lord

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

About 500 years ago Christian theology went off on a tangent. In the high middle ages people were obsessing about what happened after death...and in particular, there was a morbid fascination with hell. Faith was not so much about living as about dying.

“Much of the popular, modern conception of Hell in both religious and secular circles has its roots not in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, but in the literature and art of the European Middle Ages ... The Bible gives only... (subtle) hints about (life) after death ... Dissatisfied with...(subtlety and) silence, Roman Catholic religious leaders, along with artists and writers, embellished these hints over the centuries until they had created a vast, horrific Underworld so vividly detailed that it had incredible power over the minds of most Europeans... Peasants of the time often had a very bleak life. As odd as it may sound to modern minds, often the only ‘popular entertainment’ from week to week was the Sunday sermon by the parish priest. And the most exciting version of those sermons were the ones describing in minute detail the tortures that allegedly awaited the damned in Hell.”¹

The Reformation didn't really change the conversation. There was still this focus on hell. The disagreement was on how one got there. Reformers said faith would keep you out of hell. The Roman Catholic Church said unless you were obedient to the Pope you were doomed. Now, I know I am vastly oversimplifying this, but the basic premise is correct.

¹ <http://youall.com/HELL/medievalhell.htm>

So, where baptism was concerned, there were all kinds of thoughts running around, but they all centered on what happened after death. The Roman Catholic Church taught unless you were baptized, you were toast or at least consigned to some middle state, some kind of limbo. Protestants said many different things about baptism, such as only adult baptism, with a mature affirmation of faith counted for anything and would keep you from hell after death.

The problem is they all got it wrong. The basic assumption of the whole conversation is wrong. Jesus Christ's mission and ministry was not focused primarily on some sort of afterlife in a place far, far away. Jesus' ministry was focused on bringing heaven to earth. That is why he taught us to pray to God: "...your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

As a good Jew Jesus was focused on God's good world. We read this morning in our Old Testament lesson, from the creation story. It sets the tone for all that is to follow. In the beginning God created...and God said of this creation...it is good. That is the bottom line.

And yes, the full potential of human existence has not been reached because of sin, because humanity set off on its own course. Like a wayward two year old, we shook off God's hand and wandered out into traffic all on our own. But God did not give up. And in the fullness of time, he sent Jesus.

So, what is Jesus really about? What is baptism really about?

Jesus is about the redemption of the world and in baptism we are joined to that redemption.

Christ Jesus, as God's beloved son and as a fully human person, created the way forward for this world and all the people in it. In Christ we have set out on a road toward fulfillment...where humanity will reach its full potential and creation itself will be renewed, no longer marred by sin.

Being part of Christ is not so much about what happens when you die, though it includes that. But first and foremost, it is about how you are going to live...by what light, for what purpose?

We take our cue from things like the Sermon on the Mount² where we are challenged to live by the light of the world to come and not settle for the world as it is.

We take our cue from Jesus' commandment "Love one another! Just as I have loved you, so you must love one another."³

We take our cue from stories about Jesus, like the one we heard today, the story of his baptism. We know who Jesus was and is just by reading that story. Jesus fully identified with us and went down to the river. He went not because he needed to repent, but to express his solidarity with us.

St. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians⁴ quotes an early Christian hymn which succinctly summarizes this quality of our Lord. "Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." (NRSV) Jesus began his public ministry with an act of humility by being baptized. He ended his ministry by emptying himself and with all humility he took up the cross.

It is our privilege to be a part of him, to follow in his footsteps. And we do this not to escape hell after death but to give the world a glimpse of heaven right now and right here.

With Baptism, we are joined to Christ. His life, his death, his resurrection...his continuing work of renewal becomes our own life and work.

This is why at the baptism of infants parents and godparents promise to raise the child in the church. Baptism is not a "one off." It is not some sort of inoculation to save from hell after death. It is the moment when a person is joined to Christ. It is the moment when a person is signed up for a life of commitment.

² See Matthew chapters 5-7

³ See John 13:34

⁴ See Philippians 2:5ff

So baptism is like joining the army. You don't join and then go AWOL. You don't join and then do nothing. But you take your place in service.

Or to use another metaphor, it is like joining a sports team. You don't join and then not go to any practices or take part in any of the games. You join to be a player, to make a contribution.

And today, our scouts and recruiters have brought us fine candidates with James Burgess Gregory IV, Haynes King Johnson and Henry Ware Beck.

This day they are made children of God, members of Christ, inheritors of the kingdom. With the outward and visible sign of the water and the Word they receive inward and spiritual grace... "union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God's family the Church...and new life in the Holy Spirit."⁵ It is a life Christ has given for this world. And we are going to live that life and not go off on a tangent.

Welcome to the team! We look forward to sharing with you in the work God has given to all those who believe. Amen.

⁵ Prayer Book catechism page 858