

A Sermon for the First Sunday after the Epiphany – January 10, 2016

Church of the Epiphany, Richmond Virginia

by David H. Knight, Interim Rector

Send us your Spirit, God, to open our hearts and our minds to your word, and strengthen us to live according to your will, in Jesus Name. Amen.

On this Sunday we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord. It is the Sunday each year when we start the season of Epiphany. In the rhythm of our church year we move forward from the beautiful stories surrounding the birth of Jesus to his baptism as a thirty year old adult. What strikes us first in today's gospel passage is that it begins with a description of the people who were wondering who this strange man, John the Baptist really was. He ate weird food and dressed in a very strange way, yet he drew crowds. Who was this guy? Now these were people who, in their day, were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah. Of course John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I am is coming..." They were all hoping for someone who could lead them out of their difficulties. Their hope then was like the hope of generations that would follow. Their hope then was like our hope now, a recurrent theme in human experience and history. We live, for example, at a time when for many the

upcoming elections make us weary of hope for better things to come, nations are at war, violence is happening all around us, and people are being marginalized because of their ethnic origin, their religion, or their race. What are we looking for in our leaders? How can we discern whom we should trust in the midst of all that is being said? It's nothing new as it has been ever this in one way or another throughout human history.

In today's gospel reading, our eyes move to the moment after Jesus had been baptized and was praying. We see how the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. A voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." We see how throughout Jesus' life what began at his baptism was something that he practiced throughout his life. It would be a life of prayer—prayer that would influence his thoughts and his actions—prayer that would be the guiding force in every moment, every transition in his life.

Today is one of the days in the Prayer Book that is set aside as an appropriate day for a baptism at this service, and if there is not a baptismal candidate, as a day to renew our own Renewal of Baptismal Vows. Even though we renewed our Baptismal Vows last week with Bishop Goff present it will not harm us to renew them again in the context of this Sunday's observance of our Lord's baptism. We shall do that at the time of the creed. As one of my favorite Anglican theologians, Mae West, once said, "Too much of a good thing is not enough!"

So what might it mean for you and me if you and I were to feel God's own spirit descending upon us? How might it feel if you

and I could hear once again how God claims us as God's own and as beloved? Baptism means something very important in our lives. It reminds us that in the best of times and in the worst of times, God is very near. My dear friend, Thom Blair, has often said to people who wonder where God is that if they look to the left, God is there. If they look to the right God is there. If they look forward, God is there. The very same voice that said to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased," says to you and to me, "You are my son, you are my daughter; you are beloved. With you I am well pleased." It is important that we remember that. And we must also keep in mind, contrary to the vitriolic sound bites we seem to be hearing all around us these days, that among God's beloved are people who are of different ethnic origins from ours, different races, and different religions. In the face of all that we are hearing around us, each of us must ask ourselves, "How do my baptismal vows—those vows that remind me that I am God's beloved, influence my thinking and my actions as I am called to persevere in resisting evil, and as I am called to respect the dignity of every human being?"

One of the questions in the Renewal of Baptismal Vows that we will be asked in a few moments is, "Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?"

There is a wonderful story told by The Rev. Canon Jan Naylor Cope of the Washington National Cathedral in a sermon she preached on this Sunday last year from the Cathedral pulpit. It's a story she had read that was told by Former Archbishop of

Canterbury Michael Ramsey. The story goes that there was a man who for 35 years was an assembly line worker at a Ford Motor Company assembly plant in Michigan. After his baptism as an adult, he had a spiritual conversion. The day after his baptism he began to feel guilty about the fact that over that 35-year period working on the assembly line he'd managed to steal parts along the way and he had amassed quite a storehouse of automobile parts. He made the decision that part of the vows he had made at his baptism was that of repentance and putting things right after all those years. He got a large truck, filled it with everything he could gather from what he had stolen over the years, drove down to the plant, found his boss, presented all the parts to the boss and explained that he'd been baptized. He had realized that he had been marked as Christ's own forever, and that he must repent and that had made a difference. It mattered for him to do that, and it mattered a whole lot. As you can well imagine, his boss was flabbergasted with the whole scene of that great big truck with all the parts and with this man professing a spiritual conversion. He didn't know what to do! So he picked up the phone and called Henry Ford. He explained what had happened with this man who was returning the parts he had stolen because he had had a spiritual conversion. Old Henry Ford, a blunt, crusty old man said, "Quick! Dam up the river and let's baptize the whole plant!"

It's a great story, yet its point is well taken. When you and I are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever, that matters and it matters a whole lot. It's supposed to make a difference in our lives. A Lutheran pastor, Diane Roth has written, "Our baptisms are passports to places we

never thought we could go—to be an emissary of the living God in the desert and the wilderness, to plant seeds of hope and healing and life.”

This coming week, my prayer for you and for me is that we look around us for signs of our own baptism. I pray that in some way, each of us can experience the mystery in those signs around us for there is mystery in the waters of baptism. There is something life-giving that you and I cannot fully comprehend or explain, nor do we need to. Baptism is about trusting that we are beloved by God. I pray that each one of us will in some very real way experience the love of God and that we may then be emissaries so that we too can go forward into the days ahead planting seeds of hope and healing and new life. *Amen.*