

“May the Lord give strength to people.  
May the Lord bless us with peace!” AMEN!

This festival day of the Baptism of our Lord is  
the first time, in Matthew, where we experience  
Jesus as an adult.

Bible experts ponder that Jesus would  
have been around 31 years old,

which means the days of him being cared for  
by his parents are long gone.

A huge gap of time around his life is missing  
from Matthew’s testimony, but that doesn’t mean  
that time didn’t exist.

So, it’s important, I think, that we ought to honor  
the many people who made it possible for Jesus  
to arrive to this point of his life.

Shouldn’t we be able to consider that,  
without these other people,

Jesus would not have made it to adulthood,  
much less his baptism, without people in his life  
and the community around him?

Shouldn’t we be able to consider that,

without those people and communities listening  
to God and protecting the vulnerable,

Jesus might not have made it as far as he did?

It's not a hard stretch to say "yes."

For children in the first century experienced  
very high mortality rates.

Like 50% of children died before they reached  
the age of 10.

Fifty percent!

Whether by disease, poverty, infanticide,  
war, or malnutrition - half of all people  
born never reached adulthood.

Jesus also had other threats upon his life, of course.

Joseph and Mary whisked Jesus away to Egypt  
for his safety and security.

Consider the ways these two put themselves at  
risk to carry Jesus to birth and then emigrate  
to safety.

Consider the ways the community of Nazareth  
welcomed them back and protected Jesus  
during his growth through adolescence.

The magi learned that Herod wanted Jesus dead,  
and changed their route home to  
avoid crossing paths with that old fox again.

Those wise strangers celebrated the child, Jesus,  
and protected him.

All of those actions, from the Wise Ones,  
from Mary and Joseph, and from  
the community made them enemies of the state.

Even amidst the dangers of empire  
they chose honor and acted in ways that  
ensured Jesus to grow and move into his role.

Their actions of protection potentially could have  
led to their own arrest and execution.

Yet, still they protected him.

These, along with many we don't know about,  
with the guidance of the divine,  
protected Jesus. (AMEN!)

I'd like us to be invited to consider  
the people and communities in our own lives

who have protected nurtured our faith journeys and  
the ways we are called to support, care for,

and protect others as the body of Christ.

Many of us are self-sufficient (to an extent) now,  
but it was not always that way.

There have been people and communities that  
have brought us to this day, and to be the people,  
God is leading us to be. (Pause)

Dare I say, that this is a perfect day and way  
to think of the folks joining the body of St. Stephen.

They bring experiences, stories, and  
accounts of God working in their lives into  
the long story of St. Stephen.

This congregation is enriched by them, and  
those of us who've been here a while are eager  
to hear their stories and grow in new relationship  
with one another.

They likely have each been protected and protectors, too.

I pray that they are enriched by our presence  
as I am by theirs. (Pause)

Let me share this story with you as an illustration.

Fifteen year old Emily lost her mother to cancer,  
and several weeks after the funeral she slipped  
back into church.

Each Sunday she'd leave quickly after church  
so as to not have to talk to anyone.

In that same church, an 82 year old man, Walter,  
had lost his wife a few days before  
their 60th anniversary.

He still sat in the same spot where  
they'd worshipped together for years.

One Sunday, Emily broke down during the prayers  
and slipped into the narthex alone to weep.

Walter got up during the final hymn because  
he took a little extra time with his cane and  
came across Emily as he put on his coat  
in the narthex.

Walter recognized the look on Emily's face  
because he'd been wearing that look for months  
after his wife died.

The thing that happened next was next to amazing.  
Walter didn't give a speech.

He didn't promise that "things will get better."

He simply leaned on his cane and said,  
loud enough for just her to hear,

“It’s hard to walk into this place when  
the one you came with before  
isn’t here anymore.”

Emily, with tears said,

“I miss her so much I can’t breathe.” (Pause)

Sometimes protection comes by actively  
guarding someone from danger and sometimes  
it comes by quietly relating to what  
another person is going through and  
and then committing  
to walk alongside them.

This is not only a spiritual practice,  
it’s a human practice.

As we recount Jesus’ baptism,  
it is a time to honor the many people  
who aided him in getting to the Jordan River.

It is a time to recall that,  
despite the threats and powers of cultural norms,  
people took risks in caring for our Lord.

Might it invite us to a time when we review  
the role of church and community, and  
to be mindful of protection and  
nurturing one another.

AMEN!