

The Baptism of Our Lord
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Today is a joyous day in the Church. Like many a Sunday morning it may seem perfectly ordinary, especially during the January lull that is part of the quiet period between our celebrations of Christmas and New Year's and the beginning of Lent. But as may happen when God is at work, even the sleepest of cold winter mornings in Upstate New York becomes an occasion for the Holy Spirit to move among us.

Today we remember the baptism of Jesus. John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, was the one designated to prepare the way of the Lord. John was the best possible opening act. He was literally born to prepare the people of God, and to create a sense of anticipation among them for the arrival of God's promised Messiah. John was dramatic, charismatic, and clear about his role: **"I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming...."**

Jesus came with all the other people to hear John's preaching, was baptized with all those who repented of their sins, and was praying when the fulfillment of John's prophecy was revealed. The Gospel tells us that **"...the Holy Spirit descended upon [Jesus] in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the**

Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” In that moment Jesus was both personally and publicly affirmed as the One who was filled with the presence of God’s Holy Spirit, claimed by God as God’s Son, and was pleasing to God.

This fall my husband David and I traveled to the Holy Land. One of the amazing places we had the opportunity to visit in our pilgrimage was the Jordan River. We went by bus to a remote area that resembles the Demilitarized Zone between two countries, for the Jordan River is what separates Israel and Jordan. The place where we stood is traditionally thought to be where John the Baptist baptized Jesus. Like many other holy places, it is remarkably unimpressive. That actually gives me hope, for it confirms our belief that God can be at work anywhere, in anyone, at any time. We stood along a clearing in the river where what looks like a lane marker in a swimming pool separates the waters down the middle between the two countries. It is no wider than the nave here at Christ Church. The river was incredibly muddy, so much so that the tan colored water made it impossible to see my feet when I submerged them one stair step’s depth. It did not encourage me to want to participate in a full immersion baptism as some others around me were doing. I had to marvel at the irony of people coming to

that place to be cleansed from their sins. As I stood praying one of the quiet women from our tour group came near and asked if we were going to do baptisms. There was no formal arrangement for baptisms in our group, though one man had purchased a baptismal gown and was very enthusiastic about having his wife baptize him. I heard the disappointment in her voice and looked at her crestfallen face and asked if that was what she was hoping. She said that it was the primary reason she had come to the Holy Land. I told her that in our tradition we do not rebaptize people, but if she would like I could scoop up some water and renew her baptism. She was thrilled and walked down the steps next to me, where I cupped my hand, bent down three times to fill it, and poured the water of the Jordan River on her head and baptized her.

The marvel of having mere mortals baptized in the Jordan River thousands of years after Jesus, or at the simple font here at Christ Church, or any place else where baptisms are held, is that you and I are each filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, claimed as God's child, and affirmed in God's love in that baptism. We may not have the Holy Spirit descend "**in bodily form like a dove**" or hear the voice of God from heaven, or rate capital letters in a biblical text, but because we are each

baptized *into the Body of Christ*, all of the wonderful gifts that were bestowed upon Jesus in his baptism are shared with us in ours.

Today we gather to carry on the tradition of baptizing people who are responding to the call of God. This morning Annie and Henry will be presented, claimed and affirmed by God, receive the gift of God's Holy Spirit, and be welcomed as beloved members of the Body of Christ. This is holy work, bringing ourselves and those we love before God, whose love for us is profoundly clear in the words of the prophet Isaiah: **"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine."** In the broadest sense all of us are children of God by virtue of being born, but baptism is when we—or in the case of young children like Annie and Henry, their parents and godparents—accept God's invitation into intentional, covenantal relationship. Much like taking wedding vows, we are committing ourselves to a right and loving relationship with God, and to pursuing this lifelong, committed relationship in the context of our faith community. Tilden Edwards, an Episcopal priest, author, and founder of The Shalem Institute, said,

Some of the early Church Fathers well summarized the nature and purpose of our lives when they said that we are born in the image of God and are meant to grow into the likeness of God.

Now, as we stand as witnesses who commit to supporting Annie and Henry in their new life in Christ, let us renew our own vows and recommit to our own baptism, knowing that we are each claimed and loved by God, and every one of us is called to continue to grow as the Holy Spirit leads us. It is a joyous day, when we remember anew that God's love includes calling and claiming each one of us by name.

Amen