

The Baptism of our Lord, St. John's Olney, 12 Jan 2020  
The Reverend Henry P. McQueen  
Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17; Psalm 29

S.D.G.

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.*

The prophetic proclamation from Isaiah heralds, in our minds, the coming of Jesus into our lives. There is a close parallel between Isaiah and Jesus' baptism as we have just heard from Saint Matthew's Gospel; the connection is strong as we can hear:

Here is my servant; this is my son

I have put my spirit upon him; and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon him

my chosen, in whom my soul delights; the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased

Isaiah and Matthew are singing the same tune. This baptism is recorded in the three synoptic Gospels, and all with similar descriptions.

Mark's description is characteristically brief: *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.'*

Luke shares a similar experience though the Holy Spirit's arrival seems to come as Jesus prays after all the baptisms: *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'*

The similarity of these descriptions speaks to the importance of the event, it was certainly memorable. It is in Matthew's Gospel that we can see the baptism is part of an intentional journey taken by Jesus. Matthew tells us that "Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized." There is an specific intentionality to this baptism as told by Matthew, as there should be for all baptisms. And as there is for all baptisms, there is the presence of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I once met a gentleman who in his pure and unencumbered way of thinking described his own baptism in similar terms. His baptism was in the winter, in an open water pond, with snow on the ground. He was fully clothed and as he came up out of the water he vividly remembers seeing a dove flying above him. Despite the winter temperatures, despite the snow on the ground, despite the soaking wet clothes, he said that he was warm. The vivid memories that he holds of his baptism are powerful and surely have guided him in his life.

I am envious of his vivid memory. Like most of you here, though not all, I have no memory of my own baptism. You would think that we would remember the major events of our lives, and certainly baptism should be among those events, if not at the pinnacle.

Diane has as a unique ability to remember the exact outfit that she was wearing at any specific event. She could tell you what she was wearing on our first date or when we became engaged. She knows exactly what she wore at all her major life events; but even she does not have a memory of her baptism.

If you have evangelical friends you are aware that they can most certainly tell you the exact moment that they were 'saved'. They will know the day and the events surrounding that moment that this occurred. While a group of middle-aged men might discuss memories of their first car, evangelicals will discuss memories of the day they were 'saved'.

Most of us can share from memory a description of the baptism of Jesus, few of us know anything more than family stories about our own. Is that important or significant? Hold that thought.

As I mentioned, we know from Matthew's Gospel that Jesus took an intentional journey to meet with John at the Jordan so that he could be baptized by John. We also know that immediately following the baptism, Jesus "was led out into the wilderness by the spirit to be tested by the devil".

Jesus was baptized, and then he was tested. This is not a causal relationship, but the two events are related. His baptism prepared Jesus so that he could face the temptations and drive the devil away.

Recently I watched a documentary about the exploration of Antarctica, the ice desert at the bottom of the earth. For Americans providing support and performing scientific research in Antarctica the first stop is Christ Church New Zealand. It is there that they receive training and the needed gear to face the harsh environment. Everyone who travels to the US research centers in Antarctica are issued the same boots, gloves, parkas and other cold weather clothing and gear.

People who face harsh environments will tell you - there is no bad weather, just bad clothing choices. For this reason, a trip to this outfitting center in New Zealand is mandatory so that all who arrive on the ice in Antarctica are prepared.

Jesus was prepared to face his temptations because he first was baptized.

So back to my earlier question, is it important, or significant, that we may not know our own baptismal story?

I would suggest that it is important, but bear with me as I expand on this further.

At Jesus' baptism we witness the presence of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Son is baptized, the Holy Spirit descends upon the Son, the Father proclaims "this is my beloved with whom I am well pleased." We are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; through this we die in the waters of baptism and are raised to a new life in Jesus – Jesus' baptism is our baptism. The baptism that we will witness today is a renewal, and an image, of our own baptism. We may not be the ones to receive water and oil but witnessing a baptism is more than just a reminder of our baptism, it is a connection to our baptism and to Jesus' baptism.

When Isaiah proclaims

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.*

it is our belief that Isaiah is heralding the coming of Jesus but through the ages theologians have not been so sure. In this passage a Servant has been chosen, the Servant is the one in whom God delights, the Servant is assured of divine support. The Servant is to bring forth justice to all the world. This justice is the moral foundation for all creation. And this justice is the “why” for all who worship God.

Scholars believe that Isaiah is not speaking of one individual as the Servant, but that the Servant is all who believe that the one true God, the creator of heaven and earth, the one who is sovereign of all, is their God. Isaiah believes that God would look out on those assembled here this morning and say:

Here are my Servants, I uphold each one of you, you are my chosen, in each of you my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon you, and you will bring forth justice to all people.

The agency with which we bring justice is through God; as we say in our baptismal covenant “I will with God’s help.” As we each believe, God will uphold each of us so that we, with God’s help, will bring forth justice to all. This is why remembering our baptism is so important, we need to remember that God has placed the spirit upon us; we need to remember that God will uphold us; we need to remember that God delights in each of us. We are God’s beloved.

Jesus’ baptism prepared him to go into the wilderness, likewise our baptism prepares us. Remembering Jesus’ baptism, remembering the baptisms that we witness, is to remember our own baptism; remember it in vivid detail. Remember that we are a child of God, God’s own beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

Amen,