

Homily Advent 2 Year A 12-7-25

Matthew 3:1-12

Laboring God, with axe and winnowing fork
you clear a holy space
where hurt and destruction have no place,
and a little child holds sway.
Clear our lives of hatred and despair,
sow seeds of joy and peace,
that shoots of hope may spring forth
and we may live in harmony with one another.
Amen.

Today's gospel centers around a strange and wild prophet called John the Baptist. We don't know great deal about John the Baptist – the story of his life and ministry appears in only 91 verses spread across four gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and the book of Acts. His coming is also foretold in the Old Testament in Isaiah and Malachi. From these references, he received the name John the Forebearer because he was the "forerunner" (or "forebearer") who prepared the way for Jesus Christ's ministry, as prophesied in the Old Testament.

Isaiah says, his is:

“A voice of one calling: In the wilderness
prepare the way for the Lord” (Isaiah 40:3)

and Malachi says:

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me” (Malachi 3:1)

Matthew tells us that Jesus said of him: "I tell you this: John the Baptist is greater than any person who has ever lived until now." (Matt 11:11)

Why would that be? Let's take a minute to review what we do know about John the Baptist. First of all we met him, or actually met his mother, Elizabeth, last December when we heard Luke's gospel of Mary's visit to Elizabeth. This visit took place early in Elizabeth's and Mary's pregnancies.

And, since Mary and Elizabeth were cousins, John the Baptist and Jesus were kinsman. But they had more in common than that. The birth of each of them was announced by the Angel Gabriel. Jesus' birth was of course announced to Mary, and John the Baptist's birth

to his father Zachariah. Now Zachariah was a priest and one day when he was at his responsibilities at the temple the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that he and his wife Elizabeth were going to have a child. Zachariah (like Abraham before him) demurred saying he was much too old as was his wife. Gabriel said nevertheless the Lord will send you a child and as a consequence of his disbelief Zachariah was to be made speechless until the circumcision of his child.

All this came to pass. On the day that John the Baptist was circumcised Zachariah's speech was restored. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zachariah prophesied:

"and you my child, will be called a prophet of the most high;

For you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

To give his people the knowledge of salvation

Through the forgiveness of their sins"

(Luke 1: 76-77)

Now little more is known of John the Baptist before he began his ministry. Luke simply says “the child grew and became strong in spirit and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel” (Luke 1:80a-80-b)

John the Baptist next appears at the beginning of his ministry in the spring of AD 26. This is where this morning’s reading picks up the story. Dressed in clothing made of camel hair and subsisting on locusts and wild honey John preached in the country around the Jordan river - preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. His message was simple and clear, “repent for the kingdom of heaven is near”. Despite the forceful and uncompromising nature of his message he drew crowds from the cities and towns in the Judean countryside. And some wondered if he might possibly be the Christ. John was very clear as to who he was: “after me will come one more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” (Matt 3:11-12)

There is a bit more of the story after today’s reading. John the Evangelist recounts the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist and quotes John’s words immediately after baptizing Jesus: “I testify that this is the son of God” (John 1:34)

But the time of this powerful prophet was short and two years later he was beheaded at the command of Herod Antipas the son of King Herod. John had spoken truth to power in telling Herod that his marriage to his brother’s wife was unlawful. And, because of John the Baptist’s popularity, Herod feared that he might raise a rebellion against him. His beheading was the ultimate outcome.

But why were his few years of ministry so powerful? Why did he draw people from the cities and the countryside?

People from all walks of life including the powerful and the religious leaders.

What did John have to tell them and what was the meaning of this baptism in the waters of the Jordan?

Some saw John as fulfillment of the prophecies by Isaiah and Malachi. Some even thought he was Elijah brought back to earth.

Perhaps his success in part was due to the implied threat that time was short and the kingdom of God was near.

Perhaps it was that call to repent – to turn and start your life new again. To experience a transformative change of heart.

John's baptism was not the sacrament of baptism that we know today. Remember this was at the very beginning of Jesus Christ's ministry, so it could not be Christian baptism. Perhaps it was linked to the purification rituals in the Judaism. But these ritual purifications removed legal uncleanness so that the purified individual might resume normal activity in society or resume religious duties but they did not transform one's heart.

They did not lead to a change in behavior as described in Luke as follows:

When the crowd asked John the Baptist:

“What should we do then?”

John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”

Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked,

“what should we do?” “Don't collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”
(Luke 3:10a, 11-14)

And yet there was something in that unkept wild man that drew people to him. That gave them hope of coming out of the water a new improved version of themselves.

But is that the same as our Christian Sacrament of Baptism? Clearly Baptism is not a purification ritual to enable us to resume social and religious duties. But it is also not just the baptism bestowed by John the Baptist. To explore this question, let’s take a look at Acts 19.

In it

Saint Paul travels to Ephesus and finding some disciples

2 he asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

3 So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?”

“John’s baptism,” they replied.

4 Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.”

5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

6 When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them,”

(Acts 19:1-6)

Simply put, the baptism bestowed by John was to signify repentance and a commitment to lead a better life in preparation to know Christ. John’s baptism was of repentance and forgiveness of sins, our baptism is that and

more - it confers spiritual grace through union with Christ and a new life in the Holy Spirit.

Now when I was preparing for this homily one of the approaches I thought I might take was to ask people to stand up and share with us what they thought was the most important aspect of baptism. But, knowing that we are not a parish made up of shy and timid people I really thought we might have a lot of people volunteering to offer their input on that question. So instead I asked a few people at Wednesday night Bible study what they thought was the most important aspect of baptism. Let me share a few of their answers with you.

“Baptism is the introduction into a life with Jesus“

“Baptism is a sacrament that welcomes a person into the Christian faith, and for adults, to publicly profess their faith in Jesus.

“Baptism is a way of expressing faith. Only one way!“

“Baptism adopts a person into a religious denomination or the family of God.“

“Baptism is a ceremony that makes parents and others remember that they are responsible to teach their children to have love, compassion, and care for all people.“

“Baptism is the beginning of our journey to God. We become part of his family and follow him on our journey for our human life, and eventually to our eternal being in God.”

These are wonderful definitions, and touch on many aspects of baptism. If we take a moment and read about baptism in the catechism that's included in our Book of Common Prayer we will find that the themes that they touched on are themes that are present in the catechism. If

you want to follow along you could turn to page 858 in the Book of Common Prayer.

This is the section of the catechism that covers Holy Baptism. (And it's interesting by the way to read the entire catechism.) Here's what it says about Holy Baptism: Baptism makes us members of Christ's body. Baptism provides inward and spiritual grace through union with Christ and his death and resurrection, birth into God's family the church, forgiveness of sins and new life in the Holy Spirit.

In last Sunday's baptism, Pastor Hugh said it beautifully: "Water is a portal to new life". Water and baptism.

If we turn to the Baptismal Service on page 299 (as we did last week) we find in that service even more definition. And in it we find the Baptismal Covenant on page 304. At least once each year at the Easter vigil service we recite this covenant and frequently we recite it more often - At every baptism, anytime the bishop visits and is our celebrant and on other appointed Sundays as well.

It is this short covenant which for me defines the faith that I follow.

Now before I finish this homily let me share with you a story that has always been close to my heart. I was raised as a Catholic. For a variety of reasons it wasn't a good fit for me and my husband and we went looking at other denominations. When we came to Trinity it happened to be a Sunday at which there was a Baptism. Now at the Catholic church that I had attended (and most Catholic Churches that I knew of) most baptisms were done after mass with just the family and godparents. At Trinity, the baptism was, as it is now, part of the service. I was so incredibly uplifted by the feeling that the entire congregation was part of the baptism and that we were truly there to

support the newly baptized in his or her life in the church and in Christ. I think for the first time I began to understand the phrase, communion of saints - “the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise.” I feel that on that Sunday morning some 40 years ago was the day I joined the communion of saints.

(The definition of the communion of saints is also from the catechism on page 862.)

A couple weeks ago a posting from the episcopal diocese of Louisiana appeared in my Facebook page describing a series of discussions entitled “With God’s Help”. Now that is the repeated line in the baptismal covenant and since I was writing this homily I noticed that first. Then I noticed that Bishop Jeff Mello, our bishop, was the guest speaker for that week. So as I listened to the podcast that recorded the interaction between the host, Bishop Duckworth of Louisiana and Bishop Jeff I was struck by the importance that Bishop Jeff gives to community in baptism and other sacraments. He uses a wonderful phrase, “the gathered community”. It was seeing baptism in the context of the gathered community that so inspired me 40 years ago when I first attended Trinity. It is still that message – “that we don’t have to do this alone” as Bishop Jeff says – that resonates with me in my life in this church.

Well that’s a long way from repentant sinners on the banks of the Jordan and a wild prophet but John the Baptist – John the forerunner - pointed us to where we are today.

Amen

Addendum

In the gospels, John the Baptist's ministry of baptism was "for the remission of sin.

But the first century scholar and historian Flavius Josephus writing his **Antiquities of the Jews** around 94 A.D. said the following about John the Baptist.

“he was a good man and had urged the Jews to exert themselves to virtue, both as to justice toward one another and reverence towards God, and having done so join together in washing. For immersion in water, it was clear to him, could not be used for the forgiveness of sins, but as a sanctification of the body, and only if the soul was already thoroughly purified by right actions. And when others massed about him, they were very greatly moved by his words”

Clearly Josephus, saw John’s baptizing for the purification of the body after moral repentance already occurred.

19 While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples ² and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when^[a] you believed?”

They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

³ So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?”

“John’s baptism,” they replied.

⁴ Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” ⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the

Lord Jesus. 6 When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues^[b] and prophesied. 7 There were about twelve men in all.