

Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

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First Sunday after the Epiphany – Year A

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Today we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord, marking the beginning of Jesus' adult ministry. The gospel of Matthew finds Jesus and John the Baptist in conversation about who is to baptize whom. Jesus intentionally set out from Galilee to the River Jordan to be baptized by John. My heart is warmed as I think about the River Jordan, for our pilgrimage group renewed our baptismal vows in the River Jordan when I was last there in 2019. With our feet in the water, we were anointed with holy oil, blessed by our bishops, and then sprinkled with Jordan River water. This text comes alive for me, as do many since my times in the Holy Land. The excitement continues for me, as I am part of a pilgrimage group that returns to Israel/Palestine next month. Given that it's winter there now, I don't know whether our feet will be in the water, and yet we are going back to the River Jordan!

John had a reaction to Jesus when Jesus arrived and said, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matt 3:14). John had said just before today's passage, "I am not worthy to carry *Jesus'* sandals." (Matthew 3:11). Jesus responds to John by saying, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:15). John consents and then baptizes Jesus. What Jesus suggests to John about fulfilling all righteousness is that this is what God wills for them both. Jesus came to fulfill the will of God and also to turn things upside down or rather right side up.

This story appears in all three synoptic gospels, and the stories share some key ingredients: in all three the heavens are opened, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus, and a voice from heaven speaks. In Luke and Mark, the voice says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22; Mark 1:11). Matthew's writer changes the words of the voice

with "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt 3:17). It's as if the words in Luke and Mark are directed at Jesus alone. Matthew's writer directs the words for all to hear. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The voice from heaven was directed at John and others to hear—like a public announcement proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God whose ministry was beginning. Matthew presents the adult Jesus into light, and the voice speaks with the words of Isaiah 42:1 that we just heard:

"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." (Isaiah 42:1)

How much justice to the nations was needed in Jesus' time, and we cry out for justice in our time with loud voices. We so need justice in our time.

Jesus' baptism was a mighty act, and baptism is one of the "two great sacraments given by Christ to his Church" along with the Holy Eucharist. *The Book of Common Prayer* explains that well in the catechism.

I believe a voice from heaven speaks at our baptism, "you are my beloved child," no matter what our age at baptism. We become part of God's family at our baptism—part of the beloved community, and we begin our ministry as beloved children of God. We're sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever. Our ministry begins and we grow in faith throughout our lifetime. We enter the way of love where we learn the ways of Jesus and are supported by the community of believers as we grow into all that God intends for us to be.

So, it's a major turn in life for us to be baptized. If we are baptized as children, we have sponsors who are called godparents who help us prepare for baptism with the intention to "support the candidate by prayer and witness to grow into the full stature of Christ." Being a

godparent or a sponsor is a precious gift—a commitment to a life of Christian mentoring and support.

Many years ago, I was working in my office one Saturday while serving at Trinity, Collinsville. A young man came into the church. He had just gotten off a plane and was headed to be a godparent for a college roommate's child. He was so serious about wanting to know what being a godparent was all about. I didn't know him, and I've never seen him since. We spent about an hour talking about the responsibilities of being a godparent—the promises he would make on behalf of his friend's child, the support he would give through prayer, the mentoring he would offer around Christian living, the care and love from his heart for this child, the grace of God's love and blessing that would come to him as he lived into his role of godparent. I loved spending that time with that young man and imagine he's quite a godparent.

At our baptism we enter into the church family, the Body of Christ. "We die to our old selves and rise to new life in Christ." In our baptism we turn toward Christ and away from all that's evil. We learn to know that we are loved beyond measure no matter what we do, or haven't done, and that Jesus is with us every step of the way. Every time there is a baptism, we renew those promises made on our behalf or made by us. Today we'll renew our baptismal covenant because we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord. We profess our faith in Socratic method using the Apostles Creed and we renew our baptismal promises.

- We promise to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers. We come together in community making this place a priority.
- We promise to persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord. We're given lots of do-overs when we mess up.
- We promise to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.

We're willing to talk about our faith with other people, whether we know them or not.

- We promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. We'll look for Christ in everyone, and serve them, whether we feel like it or not. We look for Christ in our neighbors and in ourselves.
- We promise to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. As Christians we'll called to see every person as a child of God made in God's image. That's a call to lay aside the prejudices in our hearts and anything that makes us feel we're better than the other, no matter who the other is. It's a call to break down the walls that divide us and to intentionally work to eradicate the isms that infect our being.
- And with a relatively new question approved by The General Convention we promise to cherish the wondrous works of God, protecting and restoring the beauty and integrity of all creation. It's a call to care for all of God's creatures and the beauty of all that God has created, so that our children and grandchildren and all who follow us can live in the midst of that beauty.

These promises are hard work to which we'll be recommitting ourselves, and it takes us all to do this together and most importantly with God's help. I believe we renew our baptismal covenant over and over with baptisms and at other appointed times during the year, because it is so hard to live fully into this Christian life without being deeply reminded of the ways that God calls us to live in love. We can only fully live into these promises with God's help.

"And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' (Matt 3:17). Learning the ways of Jesus is lifelong work. We rejoice in Jesus' adult ministry beginning at his baptism, and we rejoice in our own baptism. ***Listen*** for that voice

saying to you, "you are my beloved child," for we're all part of this beloved community trying to be the best we can be. And remember that those words are being said to others. "You are God's beloved child." Embrace that and help others to embrace those words.

So we have this rule of life set before us that calls us to be better. Jesus calls us to somehow do our part in the world around us, with the people around us, with the situations in which we live, with the circumstances that bring joy and those that break our hearts. We're all in this together. We have so much in our time that needs us to care and fully live into all that God intends us to be, especially with the crisis of this week and the violent ways humans are treating one another. I think of Martin Luther King Jr's words in his "I Have a Dream" speech, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." We have work to continue, and we have each other to support one another—all with God's help.

Let us pray with the words of Anna Rossi in her "Prayer for a new beginning."

In the beginning you beamed light that shines in the darkest hour,  
light that no darkness could overcome:

Pierce the soul of this nation with your light,  
and enlighten everyone with your divine wisdom.

Pierce the soul of this nation with your light,  
and blind the demons of violence and hate.

Pierce the soul of this nation with your light,  
that our chests draw in hope  
and our hands grasp with strength  
and our innards gird with all their might  
and our hearts pump the lifeblood

of an unlikely, luminous new beginning being born. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anna E. Rossi, “Prayer for a New Beginning,” in *God’s Good Earth in Crisis: Liturgies of Lament*, eds. Anne Rowthorn and Jeffery Rowthorn, (Eugene, Oregon, Wipf and Stock Publisher, 2024), 120.