

**Sermon - The Baptism of Jesus - Year B**  
**Mark 1:4-11**  
**1/7/23**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In December of the year before last, it was a great blessing for me to baptize the baby son of two of my dear friends from seminary. Both of them are priests now, working at two different churches, so you can see how things might get tricky. If they hold the baptism at one church, the other would be very upset about this. And if they held it at the other, well, the same thing is true in reverse. And so - by God's wisdom - the two of them decided to irritate everybody by having their friend - me - baptize the child outside by a lake. We planned a lovely trip together to a house in Virginia next to Lake Anna, and I was filled with visions of the sacred potential of the day.

We would wake up early and gather at the lakeshore, each carrying our beloved prayer books. We would sing together in the light of the morning, and I would receive this precious child into my arms and hold him tight as I stepped into the water. I would plunge my hand below the surface and pour that sweet living water over the crown of this fresh new soul, and the heavens would rejoice as the babe would take his place among the communion of saints.

But in my daydreaming, I forgot something. I forgot to take into account a very particular circumstance that would hold undeniable influence over the potential activity of the day. It was December. In Virginia. And the lake was frozen solid. Of course it was.

So there we were, our faithful band, on the day of the baptism, crunching gingerly over the frozen grass, down to the very solid lake, quickly doing our best - like any group of clergy - to make it work. It was decided that the baptism would take place on the back deck - not on the lake, but overlooking it. After rummaging around in the kitchen, my friend emerged onto the

deck, and upon a small patio table, he placed a pitcher of warm water, and next to it, a large plastic salad bowl. Our baptismal font.

I wasn't thrilled about the newest member of the communion of saints entering into his holy inheritance via a plastic salad bowl, but there really wasn't anything else for us to do. And so we began, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Family members and friends took turns reading. My husband read the prayers. My dear friends spoke the words of the Baptismal Covenant on behalf of their beloved son, and then I blessed the waters. I raised the pitcher and poured, right into that awful plastic salad bowl, and the echoes of the moving water rang out into the cold, quiet morning like the rush of a spring eager to meet the sea...

There were other moving waters, too. We were...crying, all of the sudden - just a little. But something unmistakable was shifting. The sun shone on the water as the ancient blessing stretched out across the expanse of the terrible plastic salad bowl, and **it was all suddenly quite clear.** Here, in this bowl, was the Jordan River. Here was the font of my friend's church, and the font of his wife's, and the font of St. Paul's Cathedral in London and St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem and Saint Luke's in Sister Bay. Here was the Mississippi River where one summer I saw a whole school bus full of people - adults - dressed in white, wading in and absolutely hollering about their love of their crucified and risen Lord Jesus.

There on that frozen back deck was the font in every cathedral, in every stadium-sized mega church, in every small village parish. This was the font into which princes had been carried in the Byzantine east, the font of every person baptized in the public square, and the font of every person baptized quietly, in secret, some in places where the very act of praying over water in the name of Jesus Christ was an instant sentence to death. Here were the waters of John the Baptist, St. Peter, St. John, and St. Barnabas. Of St. Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa, of Julian of

Norwich, of Catherine of Sienna, of Edith Stein, of Mother Theresa, of every bishop and priest, every college student suddenly and eagerly consumed by hope, every little child balanced in the arms of someone who loves them.

I used to wonder about the Baptism of Jesus in the Gospels. This recollection is found in every single Gospel - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Baptism, after all, is a cleansing from sin, and as the Epistle to the Hebrews declares, Jesus Christ was like us in every way except sin. Why would Jesus need to be cleansed from something that he did not have? In the *Book of Common Prayer*, the Catechism tells us that baptism is: “the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ’s body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God.” Sure, for *us* this is extraordinary. But for Jesus? No adoption is necessary for the one who is already the Son of God.

The answer is there if we look closely. In each of the Gospel texts describing the baptism of Jesus, we are not given a model for how we ourselves are to be baptized. This is not an instruction manual for Christians - Jesus will give this to his disciples later as he instructs them to go forth and baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. What we have here - appropriately for the season - is an **epiphany**. This is a revelation of what is true about God. That the fullness of the Trinitarian God: the Father (in the voice that echoes from the heavens), the Son (in the man who steps into the Jordan), and the Holy Spirit (the dove which descends upon one who is beloved) has come down to inhabit humanity in the Incarnation, and that human beings - all of them - will be welcomed into the fullness of divine life.

In the fourth century, St. Maximus of Turin gave a sermon on the baptism of Christ that makes this clear. He writes that, “Christ is baptized not that he may be sanctified by the waters, but that he himself may sanctify the waters.” There is no individual sin, here, to be reconciled.

There is no personal unity with God to be sought. But as Christ steps into the waters, all of Creation is borne between his shoulders, and the waters of the Jordan pour freshly into every drop of water that has ever sealed anyone as Christ's own forever. Here is confectioned the only true Elixir of Life. Here, the galaxy of distance between humanity and God is collapsed to the circumference of a salad bowl.

And so by his baptism, Jesus reveals to us what is true. That by God's love - as we are cleansed from sin and welcomed fully into the divine life of his Incarnate and Resurrected Son - it is each one of us who can lift our faces to the sky and hear his voice: *this is my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*

Amen.