

SERMON
Sunday January 11 2025
Matthew 3:3-17 – The Baptism of our Lord

On this Sunday we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord. We gather to celebrate one of the foundations of the Christian faith – baptism. Usually if there is a baptism to be celebrated of a newborn it happens on this day. The liturgy for today is focussed on an adoption into God’s family. It is only one way we come to experience God’s love as the Spirit comes down to us. For those that are not baptized, you may ask, “Where do I fit in then?” God created all people in his image, and everyone is worthy of his love. Is one way, an opportunity to begin a new journey of faith as a child of God.

When John was baptizing the crowds at the river Jordan, he baptized with a baptism of repentance. To be baptized with a baptism of repentance was to ask people to turn to God.

So, when Jesus came to be baptized by John, John wanted to prevent this and he says to Jesus, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered, “Let it be so now; for it is fitting for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” When Jesus was baptized, he was not baptized with a baptism of repentance like the crowds were. for he was the Son of man and not needing to repent. He was baptized with a baptism of righteousness. God knew there would need to be a visible sign for the crowds to understand who Jesus really was. As he rose from the waters the heavens opened up, and Jesus saw the Spirit of God descend like a dove and shining on him. And then God said from heaven, “This is my Son the Beloved with whom I am well pleased.” This was the first time God spoke aloud. It was important for the crowds to see and hear the validation of Jesus as not simply human but also the divine Son of God. The future of Jesus’ ministry depended on God’s voice.

Once Jesus arises from the moment, in the next three years he faces the things that every human fears. He accepts the vulnerability, the powerlessness, the need. He gets hungry and thirsty. He gets tired and lonely. He experiences misunderstanding, conflict, grief, and betrayal. Jesus moves toward the fulfillment of what righteousness really means, remaining on the cross, refusing to save himself because he did not sin.

While there is much on which a preacher might focus in a sermon on Jesus' baptism in Matthew — personal confirmation of identity, public acknowledgement of said identity, the role of the Spirit — this time around I am drawn to the wilderness. Jesus is baptized and then is led into the wilderness. The wilderness! While we know how the ordeal ends, we shouldn't be too quick to bank on Jesus' divinity. If we do, we lose what it means to be in the wilderness — because when you are in it, you are in it. Period.

If there is any comparison between Jesus' baptism and ours, any at all, it's that baptism assumes wilderness. Not to test our loyalty. Not to tempt God's commitment. Not to get us to turn on the Spirit. No. Because none of that is actually biblical. A quick review of Numbers should remind us that being in the wilderness is part of what it means to be the people of God.

I wonder if too often, however, we surmise that our wilderness wanderings are more personal than God had in mind. We take our desert stages in life as all about our abilities to negotiate our trials, endure our burdens, push our way through hardships as if surviving is somehow the same as salvation.

I don't know about you, but journeying through the wilderness and making it out alive by my own sheer will and perseverance doesn't sound very salvific to me. In fact, it sounds lonely. It sounds sad. And it doesn't sound like something our God, who is all about relationship, demands.

So, if we take Jesus' baptism seriously, what does it mean to be led into the wilderness if our own self is not on the line? If proving our worth or substantiating our identity is not the issue? If evidencing our wherewithal to get through life's challenges is not in question? It means that being baptized and then immediately being thrown into the wilderness is about faith lived in community.

Jesus' baptism suggests that ending up in the wilderness is not always about the self but about the other. About God's other. Jesus' time in the wilderness does not necessarily verify his own sense of self, but his sense of self for the sake of who God needs him to be for the world God seeks to save.

We are reminded that with baptism comes wilderness and that wilderness is not an individual affair. The Israelites were not in the wilderness alone. They had

each other. Jesus was not in the wilderness alone. He had the Spirit and the promise of God's declaration. We are never in the wilderness alone. Our baptism propels us into community and if ever we rely on baptism as only that which safeguards our own individual security we have misinterpreted Matthew's story.

As the first Sunday after Epiphany, this is both promise and reminder. We are reminded of the promise that Baptism brings — the promise that even in the wilderness, even in spite of it, and sometimes even because of it, our call to bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven is meant to be manifest to all. We are not privy to personal epiphanies, or if we are, we will need to figure out how to share them or make it possible for others to experience them.

The nature of epiphanies is communal, suggests Matthew. "*This* is my beloved son." Everybody got to hear that, not just Jesus, and so when he is led into the wilderness, he already knows this is not a private affair, a personal test, a lone examination. The wilderness is its own epiphany, but one for all to witness. Never forget you are who God has claimed you to be, remember too that baptism is also about who the other needs you, and them, to be. To be present in the wilderness. To tell the other of God's words from heaven. To proclaim that baptism cannot just be about the self but is about living life as being the light of the world for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven here and now. You are God's beloved children. Amen.