

Epiphany 1, Year A
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
January 8, 2023
Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

Beloved

Happy Epiphany!

We began this new season of Epiphany on Friday, January 6, the first day after the twelve days of Christmas or, according to an even older way of counting, the thirteenth day of Christmas.

There are seven Sundays in Epiphanytide or the season after Epiphany. Week by week we will see Jesus the Christ revealed in some new way to some new audience.

Today we commemorate the baptism of Jesus by his cousin John the Baptizer in the Jordan River. This feast is known as the Baptism of Our Lord.

We know this story. It might be so familiar that we might not catch some of what is most important about it.

Lots of people are going down to the Jordan, literally down, down, down, from Jerusalem and elsewhere down below sea level, to the wilderness of Judea, a desert, to where John is baptizing all comers in a muddy creek we know as the Jordan River.

As we explored during Advent, John, in this ministry in the desert down by the riverside, is calling people to change their minds, change their mindsets. The word in Greek is *metanoia*. It doesn't mean "repent" as we usually think of it. It means change. It isn't remorse; it isn't regret. It's change; changing behavior, changing our thinking, changing how we comprehend who we are and who God is in the world.

To underscore the need for everyone to face change and to change, John himself has changed. He is a child of the religious establishment if ever there was one. His parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, are both from priestly families. They are religious insiders. Religion is the family business. John has left the temple and the

holy city of Jerusalem and civilization and gone down, down, down to the Judean wilderness, to the desert. And he's adopted a funky way of dressing: itchy camel's hair and has adopted a very strange diet. He is now an entophagarian which means he eats insects—grasshoppers and wild honey.

Many people think John might be the Messiah. He says, *Nope, not me. I am not. But there's one coming after me. I'm preparing the way for him, for the Messiah, the Anointed One. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

And then Jesus shows up. To be baptized. Like everybody else.

In our gospel today, from Matthew, John the Baptizer hesitates to baptize his cousin. John tries to talk Jesus out of it, saying, *I shouldn't baptize you; you should baptize me.* Jesus says, *Baptize me, John. It's the right thing to do right now.* And John consents.

The gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism in Matthew, Mark, and Luke indicate that the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus as he comes up out of the water. Matthew's version as we've just heard says Jesus sees the heavens open and sees the Holy Spirit descend in the form of a dove, and it alights upon him. He has had a divine encounter himself, himself the only begotten Child of God, receiving this sign of the Holy Spirit's descent in power upon him and the most amazing words of blessing: a voice from heaven saying, "This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

We just heard in the psalm about the voice of God. It's big and loud sometimes, frankly, quite scary at various times. What did that voice sound like? I realize that I always imagine these words coming gently, but if you're feeling the Holy Spirit come down upon you and see it in the form of a dove alight on you, and then you hear a voice from heaven—maybe it was terrifying as well as exhilarating, maybe it was a giant voice that got Jesus' attention—even Jesus—in a new way to hear from the very mouth of God, "You are my beloved. I'm pleased with you."

Jesus' baptism was not the same as the sacrament of baptism as we now understand it and practice it. Many things about it, however, carry over to our practice of baptism as a sacrament.

For Jesus, the baptism of John served as a rite of initiation. It started something new with him, for him, and in his ministry.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, after receiving the Spirit and hearing God's blessing of belovedness, Jesus immediately goes across the Jordan River, farther into the wilderness, where he will fast and pray and be tested for forty days and forty nights. This intensive time of preparation is initiated, begun by his baptism. During this wilderness time he will figure out what the character and direction of his public ministry will be. It's a time of intense discernment. His baptism initiates the work he has been placed on earth to do.

The same is true for us. At the time we are baptized we may not know for sure what our work in the world is to be. But at that time we declare what we believe, and we make promises that guide the character and direction of our lives as Christ followers from our baptism onward. Together these declarations and promises form our baptismal covenant, a covenant we will renew together in a few minutes.

We still speak of the sacrament of baptism as a rite of initiation. It is the formal inauguration of our lives as Christians, as Christ followers. It marks us in a profound way as children of God. We understand that by it we are cleansed from sin, from inadequacy, from brokenness, and that it incorporates, it literally takes us into the body of Christ as never before as God's children.

At the baptism of Jesus, God speaks words of blessing and favor. Jesus the Christ hears in an empowering and lifechanging way for him that he is beloved of God.

The same message of belovedness is ours, at and through our baptism, and beyond it because of God's saving and restoring work in and through Christ on our behalf.

A sacrament makes visible an invisible reality. It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In the sacrament of baptism, we are revealed to be even more fully who we already are—God's beloved children.

In the sacrament of baptism as we practice it, after being baptized with water in the name of the Holy Trinity, we are smeared with oil. This is the meaning of anointing, literally. It is the literal meaning of Messiah or Christ, *one smeared with oil*.

In our tradition, we anoint people at baptism with the holy oil of chrism. It can only be conferred by a bishop. It combines holy oil with the marvelous fragrance of balsam. It is smeared on our foreheads, our name is called, and over us is said, *You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever*.

This declaration of belovedness was from God for Jesus the Christ, God's unique and only begotten Child, and it is also for us. This is the message Jesus came to reveal in ways we could no longer miss seeing, in declarations we could no longer avoid hearing. You are God's beloved. God delights in you. God is pleased with you, children made in the image of God.

If you resist this message, you are not alone. We have been resisting it since the beginning.

We have always been denying it, confusing the facts, conflating actions and inactions with personhood. Yes, we make mistakes. Yes, we commit errors. Yes, we miss the mark. Yes, we fall short. Yes, we hurt other people and hurt God's creation. Yes, we need to make amends for the evil we do and for the evil done in our names and on our behalf. Yes, we need divine intervention to set things right.

And these are all things that we do or don't do, should do or shouldn't do. None of these is who we are.

Every single person who has ever been more is more, so much more, than the worst thing they have ever done.

Jesus came to remind us of that message and to invite us to live as people who know that it is true—true for us and for every other person created in God's image. It is not that we are perfect and need no assistance and have it all squared away all by ourselves. It is rather that, even though we are imperfect, we can be healed, which is the same thing as being made whole, restored to wholeness.

Yes, we are broken by the changes and chances of this life. But broken is not bad, it's just broken. And God is the source of health and healing and the author of both.

This is why Jesus came, so that we would know that God loves us even though we are broken and come to know that God is the Great Physician and has come to meet us where we are in the person of Jesus the Christ to heal us, to help us, to restore us, and to befriend us.

In the baptism of our Lord, which we celebrate today, we celebrate also the gift of the Holy Spirit and the message of divine favor that were for Jesus the Christ and through him are for us as well. We are God's beloved. God looks on us with delight and favor. Let's live like those people. Let's walk in love. Let's be who we

are. Let's behold who we are and become what we receive: the body of Christ, broken and given for the world.