

Water of Life

Preached on The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Jan. 17, 2021
Text: Mark 1: 1-11

Most of us probably don't know the date of our baptisms. As a tradition that practices paedobaptism or infant baptism, this is to be expected. Yet, we all hold our baptisms to be one of the most important events in our lives. But Jesus's baptism is even more important for us, the Church, and the whole world.

For much of the Church's history the Baptism of our Lord was celebrated alongside the Feast of the Epiphany in some way or another. You'll find this in many older prayers for the Feast of the Epiphany, such as the "For Epiphanytide" from the *Manual for Priests*, a beloved supplementary liturgical text among high church Anglicans:

*Almighty God, who at the baptism of thy blessed Son Jesus Christ in the river Jordan didst manifest his glorious Godhead: Grant, we beseech thee, that the brightness of his presence may shine in our hearts, and his glory be set forth in our lives; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen"*

In the older Western calendar, used by the older Books of Common Prayer, this meant that the Baptism of our Lord didn't have its own special feast day. In modern calendars, the Baptism is celebrated on the Sunday during the Octave of the Epiphany, meaning that most parishes end up celebrating the Baptism and the Epiphany together anyway. "Epiphany Sunday" has become the norm in our country. The American 1928 Book of Common Prayer did something a bit different, however: the post-Epiphany Gospel readings were shuffled a bit, and the Baptism was inserted on the 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany. This means that for parishes that use the '28 Prayer Book, we will always celebrate the Baptism of our Lord a week or two after the celebration of the Epiphany proper.

In our gospel this morning, John the Baptist says:

"After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

This last verse speaks to the difference between John's ministry of Baptism and Christian Baptism. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance as a way of preparing for the Lord's coming. But it was an incomplete baptism, as John himself testified. St. Gregory Nazianzen writes of three baptisms in Scripture:

Moses baptized, but in water, in the cloud and in the sea; but this he did figuratively. John also baptized, not indeed in the rite of the Jews, not solely in water, but also for the remission of sins; yet not in an entirely

spiritual manner, for he had not added: "in the spirit." Jesus baptized, but in the Spirit; and this is perfection.

And when we are baptized, His own Spirit indwells us, and overflows in our lives.

When Jesus was at the Feast of Tabernacles, we read in John 7:37-9 that:

Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

The Spirit, as you recall, falls on the Church at Pentecost. Immediately after the Spirit falls on the Apostles, the Spirit's work flows out of them in the form of preaching, the result of which was 3,000 conversions and baptisms among the pilgrims in Jerusalem. When we are baptized as Christians, it is in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus commanded. We are then born again of water and spirit, as Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be. In our baptismal service, we conclude with two prayers that illustrate the work of the Spirit in our baptism (pp. 280-81 in your Prayer Book):

We yield thee hearty thanks, most merciful Father, that it hath pleased thee to regenerate this Child [or for those of riper years, this thy Servant] with thy Holy Spirit, to receive him for thine own Child, and to incorporate him into thy holy Church. And humbly we beseech thee to grant, that he being dead unto sin, my live unto righteousness, and being buried with Christ in his death, may also be partaker of his resurrection; so that finally, with the residue of thy holy Church, he may be an inheritor of thine everlasting kingdom; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named; Grant you to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; that, Christ dwelling in your hearts by faith, ye may be filled with all the fulness of God. Amen.

We are regenerate; that is, born again by the Spirit. We are strengthened by the Spirit. We are indwelt with the Spirit. And, as we live our Christian lives, the Spirit flows from us like waters of living water, bearing witness to Christ and his Kingdom, because Christ baptizes us with the Holy Spirit, as John foretold. Let's continue in our Gospel at verse 9:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

This is the official inauguration of Jesus's ministry. The Holy Spirit will henceforth be active in all of his work, his teachings and healings, in the same way he is now active in Word and Sacrament. Furthermore, the Father approves Him as His ambassador, His Sent One, reconciling the world unto Himself, just as we are ambassadors to the world, bringing it the Good News and manifesting Christ's reconciling love to the world.

This is also one of the clearest passages depicting the Trinity in the Gospels. First, by being called by God "my beloved Son," Jesus' divinity is declared. But notice also that all three Persons of the Trinity are active in Jesus' baptism. The Father is speaking from heaven, the Son is being baptized and spoken over, and the Spirit is descending like a dove. This tells us that the Son is not the Father, the Father is not the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Son. Though we have one God, our God is Trinity: three divine Persons, co-equal, and co-eternal, as we confess in the Creeds. In his baptism, Jesus is shown for who he really is: God.

In our baptisms, all three Persons are similarly active. As we have just seen, we address the Father throughout the Baptismal service. We are baptized into Christ and his death. We are baptized with water and regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Christian baptism, like everything in our faith, is deeply trinitarian. That means that it's deeply relational, as the Persons of the Trinity use our baptism to bring us into fellowship with God and fellowship with his Church. This is a result of the outflowing onto us of the eternal fellowship within the Trinity. God loves us because God is love and has always loved within that Trinitarian fellowship. In a sense, God can't help but love. He didn't have to create us in order to have someone to love. He has always loved.

Note also the approval God speaks over Jesus in his baptism: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." When we are baptized into Christ, we, too, are declared to be beloved children of God, with whom he is well pleased. That said, there are important differences. Jesus is the only-begotten Son of God; we are adopted Sons and Daughters of God. Jesus pleased God because of his own deeds; we please God because of Christ's.

Just as Jesus's baptism was the beginning of His ministry, so too is our baptism the beginning of our ministries. Our baptism begins our life in the Church, and life in the Church is one of ministry. Now, that, of course, will look different for each person, depending on our different vocations. The ministry of a child is far different than that of a parent. The ministry of a priest is different than that of a layman. The ministry of a retired person is different than that of someone who is in the office or at the worksite. But for all of us, ministry can be summed up in those first two great commandments: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind," and "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Our ministries always boil down to applying those two commandments in our daily lives.

Most importantly, remember that our baptisms identify us with Christ. But a question arises, why did Jesus have to be baptized? In Matthew's Gospel, John initially tries to turn Jesus away from baptism, saying: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you

come to me?’ This shock at Jesus being baptized was an issue from the very beginning of the Church. It is worth considering for a moment.

Jesus had no sins of which to repent. He was truly the Master and John the Baptist the servant. Yet, Jesus insisted on being baptized. You’ll remember Jesus’s answer to John when John tried to refuse. “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus willingly submitted to John’s baptism. The Church Father St. Jerome gives us three reasons Jesus did this.

First, “because He was born a man, that He might fulfil all justice and humility of the Law.” Second, “that by His baptism He might confirm John’s baptism.” Third, “that by sanctifying the waters of the Jordan through the descent of the Dove, He might show the Holy Spirit’s advent in the baptism of believers.”

Just as we remember in the Feast of the Circumcision, so here, Jesus is becoming one of us in submitting to the Law, though He will keep it perfectly. He is also confirming John’s ministry as the herald of the new covenant. Finally, He is initiating Christian Baptism. He is sanctifying the waters to become a holy sacrament, where the Holy Spirit will come upon us, just as it did Him. And this sacrament becomes perfected through Christ’s dying and rising again. Just before His Ascension, Christ told His apostles to make disciples of all people, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus had no sin of which to repent. He had no sin that needed remission. But Jesus identified with our sin, foreshadowing that ultimate identification when he takes our sins upon himself as he hangs on the Cross. This is why John said, “Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world.” Jesus took on our human nature and the burden of our sins, even being crucified for our sakes. And when we are baptized into Christ, we also are crucified with Christ, and raised again to new life. Our old self dies, so that we might be made new creatures, having Christ’s righteousness, co-heirs with him in His Kingdom.

In our Collect we prayed:

Almighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth; Mercifully hear the supplications of thy people, and grant us thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Because we have been baptized into Christ, our prayers and supplications have the ear of our heavenly Father. Because our baptisms mark us as belonging to Jesus, pleasing the Father because he was pleasing to the Father, we can indeed have peace. Whether you can recall your own baptism or not, the fact that it happened is assurance of God’s promises, promises foretold by John, fulfilled by Jesus as he was baptized in the Jordan, sanctifying those waters for you, for me, and for all who come to Him.

In the Name...