

Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany Year C

January 13, 2019

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Isaiah 43:1-7

Acts 8:14-17

Psalms 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17,21-22

One day two friends were playing near a pond. The older of the two boys takes the younger boy's head and dunks it into the pond a few times. They both get up giggling. A man walks by and says, "My goodness, what on earth do you think you boys are doing? Someone could get hurt." The older boy says, "Oh, we were only playing church. I was baptizing him. You know, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the in-the-hole-he-goes!"

Pause

Setting humor aside, Christ's humanity is displayed in Luke's narrative we heard this morning. Luke focuses on the humility of the setting of Baptism instead of the grandeur.

Baptism is a sacrament. It is the first one Jesus taught. Baptism is a sacrament of beginning for all new Christians – infants, children of any age, and adults. A sacrament is "an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace." It is an earthly sign of a heavenly activity. When we baptize someone in the Episcopal Church, the outward sign is water, but inside, the person is changed. God's grace is received.

Jesus did not invent baptism. At that time many Jewish people understood baptism to be a cleansing, a way to wash away sins. Baptism was required for membership into some sects.

When Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, a famous practitioner of Jewish Baptism, he took on an existing practice of the ancient world and completely redefined it. John had spent his days calling people to be transformed and to be prepared for the coming Messiah. John spoke of his own practice of baptism saying, "I baptize you with water for repentance. But one more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with water and fire.

Jesus adopted the idea of a cleansing ritual required for entry into a community. And just as John had promised, Jesus' baptism added new dimensions starting with His baptism in the Jordan River.

Luke's account differs a bit from the other Gospels. No one in particular sees the heavens opened up to proclaim Jesus is the Messiah. As Jesus comes up from the water, he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove alighting on him. As Jesus was praying, a voice came from heaven saying, "You are my beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased."

John knew that he was just a mere stagehand in Jesus' Baptism. It was Jesus who ignited a fire, the Holy Spirit within, that changes all who were and are to be baptized from the inside out. Through Baptism we are raised to a new life.

As Jesus departed from his friends, he promised that God would send the Holy Spirit to abide with his followers, the church. In today's reading from the book of Acts, Peter and John went into Samaria and prayed for the people to receive the Holy Spirit. Up until their visit, the

Spirit had not come upon any of the Samaritans; they had only been baptized in the name of our Lord Jesus. Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. In fact, the entire book of Acts is the story of Christ's people living with the presence of the Holy Spirit and it is our story too.

On this feast of the Baptism of our Lord, may we see the clear, life-sustaining waters of our own baptism. We are the beloved of God, the God who loves us, who cries with us and for us, who knows the pain and despair and anger we experience because he has experienced it all himself by becoming one of us.

In the waters of baptism, we embrace the Spirit of God and that Spirit embraces us, as well. God the Creator and Father is present with us in all our tears and laughter, in all our struggles and triumphs and in our every grief and joy.

Please join me now as we renew our own baptismal vows found on page 8 of today's bulletin.

Resources for this sermon:

- Lectionary Levity by Ian S. Markham and Samantha R.E. Gottlich
- Walk in Love-Episcopal Beliefs and Practices by Scott Gun and Melody Wilson Shobe
- Revised Common Lectionary – Episcopal Edition – NRSV
- The Message by Eugene H. Peterson
- Connections for January 13, 2019