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The Baptism of Our Lord

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“As the people were filled with expectation . . .” In one brief, deeply significant moment, all attention is focused upon the experience itself. Jesus is being baptized. The one in whose name we are baptized is right there, in that space. Everything else fades into the background. Nothing else seems to matter — only this single moment, and Jesus. Like many a significant moment it is brief, and it is the surrounding circumstances that give the moment its context.

We may be able to recall a moment in our life that while significant at the time, upon reflection allowed us the insight to see something more. My friend Charles recently recalled the moment in December of 2008 when he thought he would lose his business. Clients had cancelled contracts, leaving him struggling to pay the bills. It was a difficult and scary time, one of uncertainty. Yet, more than the fear and stress, it is the care and support of others he remembers. The friends who rallied around him offering words of encouragement; the colleagues who gave him work to keep him in business. The family members who listened, and who helped to cover rent. Mostly, he recalls vividly and deeply the way they made him feel. They reminded him of his worth, they extended support and they loved him. Out of their generosity and care for him, his business survived, and he cherishes these relationships and their kindness to this day.

Similarly, it is that which surrounds the Baptism of Jesus which leads us into a fuller, deeper understanding of Baptism itself. Baptism is the first sacrament on which all else rests. Jesus' baptism points the way in which we may more fully come to understand the gift of our own, giving us a model for our own lives and relationship with God, and others.

Baptism marks for Jesus the beginning of his public ministry. Through it, he is empowered by the Spirit for a life of service and mission. For us also, baptism in the faith means that there is no longer any life that is not in part, public life. Going forward, life always carries within it the hope for relationship, and our call to extend ourselves to the world.

For John, baptism is the beginning. It is both gift and responsibility. In baptism we are called to a mission of sending and going that conveys a quality of being. This “being-sent-ness” is not about literal geographic sending, but about the attitude one carries within, wherever one goes. Mission arises out of relationship and as we build networks of relationship. We come here to be fed as community, so that as a community might bring mission to life.

Another invitation Jesus' baptism invites us into is the invitation to pray, discern, and to be prepared to let go of those things that do not serve us. The cleansing, renewing images of wind, fire and water found in our gospel encourage us to clear the clutter of our lives, to let go of the things that hold us back, and to go forward as we strive to live and love well in Christ's name.

In Jesus' baptism the tone is set for our sacrament of baptism, a baptism employing prayer, and the symbols of water, of oil and of light. As we call upon the power of the Holy Spirit, baptism, a sacramental mystery of the church, brings a new life of belonging and mutuality in and through Christ. Jesus has been claimed through baptism, just as we are claimed through baptism, and it is a reciprocal claim. We hear spoken the words of the Holy Spirit: “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” These are the words spoken to Jesus as he is praying after his baptism, AND they are the words spoken to each one of us.

How might our lives be different if we were to truly accept and embrace these words as our own? When we awoke this morning, was our first thought, “I am beloved. God is with me?” Or did our minds quickly race to our list of things to get done, with regret for what we failed to accomplish yesterday. God speaks to

us with tender and loving words, “You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.” Reminding us we are worth, indeed we are beloved.

How might our lives be altered if these words became our statement of affirmation every day? I am beloved. God is pleased with me. When we, like Jesus, come to God in prayer, speaking our concerns and hopes, our joys and fears, God meets us there. Certainly, it can be difficult to hear God speaking when our lives are full of noise and clutter. And if we spend our energy refuting this claim of love God has on our lives, convincing ourselves that we’re not worthy, or good enough, or deserving of such a love, we may not be able hear, or dare to believe it, when God says to us, “You are my beloved, in you I am well pleased.

Within our baptismal covenant, are words that help us understand what it is to be a Christian. What if we imagined them as a roadmap to guide us as we strive, with God’s help, to live out our ministry. The things to which they call us are holy elements of a faithful life: prayer & study, breaking bread and loving our neighbor; returning to God when we’ve strayed, and resisting the evil that wants to divert us. We are called to love: God, our neighbors, ourselves, and to act with integrity and equity, as we work to ensure justice for all. We are a community of believers with genuine relationships based on our shared, mutual vulnerability and God’s transforming love for us. Together we continue to grow and transform beyond the moment of our baptism

In a moment, we will be invited to renew together our baptismal covenant. Its words are familiar to us. They are found in our creeds and referenced in our prayers. And, Sometimes, they can become rote, so familiar that we may lose sight of their significance and meaning.

What if, in our speaking these words aloud today, we attempted to offer them as if for the first time? What if these sacred and timeless words were to arise from the place deep within us where the fire of Christ and the Holy Spirit is kindled and glowing. How might we experience this covenant anew, and how might that inform the way in which we go forward in ministry and love?

Yesterday, in the Diocese of Los Angeles, the church ordained five new priests. Present to their baptismal covenant and feeling the excitement and the weight of responsibility as ones called to preach, teach, pastor, and bless, the Rev. Tom Carey reminded them that as servants of Christ called to serve alongside others, they come as they are with their hopes and imaginings, and their own neuroses and doubts. They will surely give to this vocation all that they have, and sometimes it may be difficult. Sharing words from the song Nature Boy, by Nat King Cole, Tom reminded them that in times of doubt, or worry, or uncertainty about what to do, or how to be, *“The greatest thing you’ll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return.”*

To love and be loved in return is essence of the Christian life.

And isn’t this at the heart of baptism, that Jesus calls us into a new life in which we are to learn to love, and to learn to be loved in return? We learn to love by modeling Jesus’ example, and by practicing the tools of our faith.

Just as Charles learned that the love seeded in relationship long ago continues to grow and bless beyond that moment, so too do we continue to grow and transform beyond the moment of our baptism. It

is the events surrounding Jesus’ baptism which were transforming. Through baptism, Jesus entered into a larger and more visible life, into new relationships rooted in mutuality and love, and was secure in the knowledge that he had been claimed by God . . . as we too, may be secure.