

First Sunday after the Epiphany – Year A: The Baptism of Jesus  
January 8, 2012  
St. Stephen's Orinda

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### To Know Christ and to Make Him Known

In the season of Epiphany, we remember the events that inform our understanding of who Jesus is for us, and what his life and teachings, and death and resurrection mean for us. Two days ago, we celebrated the feast of the Epiphany, on which we remember the visit of the magi to the holy family. We observe this holy day as the “manifestation of Christ to the Gentile” opening up salvation to those outside the “Chosen People” – that is US! On this first Sunday after the feast of the Epiphany, we remember the Baptism of Jesus. This event is one of the few that is covered by all four gospel writers, as those of you who have now read Matthew, Mark, and Luke can attest. That makes it fairly certain that this did happen as an event in history. The four gospels may approach the baptism slightly differently, but in each, the common element is there. Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. This event commands a central position at the beginning of his public ministry in the life of Jesus and it is a major event in the life of the ongoing Christian community through the ages.

So it happened. But why? For a long time, the baptism of Jesus gave me trouble. It didn't make sense to me that Jesus, whom our theology calls the only human being without sin, would submit to baptism. Now maybe I've just studied too much theology, or not enough, but I couldn't help wonder why the eternal Word, the uncreated and undefiled second person of the Trinity should accept a cleansing rite from a grungy prophet whose purpose was to call sinners to repentance for the forgiveness of their sins. This cleansing rite itself, up until John, was essentially an initiation rite for Gentiles to wash away the defilements of the Gentile world before joining the set apart and chosen people of Israel. So why Jesus, and why baptism?

I suppose that Jesus didn't need baptism at all. He is, after all, the One who was without sin. So he didn't need baptism. But he also didn't need to go out of his way to mix socially with the outcasts of society, with notorious sinners, beggars, the diseased, the disenfranchised and marginalized. But he did. Jesus entered fully and completely into their world, in order to fully and completely disclose God's love for them as they are, not as they ought to be.

Jesus was far from being just a prophet who preached **to** people. Jesus identified **with** people. He identified with them, with us, to the extent that he entered the swirling, sin-saturated water of the Jordan River, accepting the baptism of John. In fact, in the way Matthew relates the story, Jesus has to talk John into baptizing him. Mark, our gospel this year, is much direct, and only tells us that Jesus showed up and John baptized him. So Jesus steps into the leftover bathwater of the unclean, and Jesus, the Clean One, shows us God's passion for us. He shows us God's willingness to go to any length to show – to show and not just to say – “I love you.”

Jesus could have been an innocent bystander to our lives. That would have been one way Emmanuel, God with us, could have been in our world. Had Jesus chosen that role, it would have begun here at John's baptismal waters. Jesus would have shown up on that day and been a warm and welcoming presence to those gathered at the waters' edge. He would have encouraged people to repent and accept John's baptism. After they were washed by John, Jesus would have congratulated them on their decision, handed them a fluffy towel to dry themselves and then extended an invitation to them to follow him—at a distance.

Jesus could have made a choice to a sort of disengaged participation in our human experience. If he had, he would not have been the promised "Emmanuel, God-with-us," but rather, "God-not-quite-with us." When God chose to enter our lives, God did not do it in half measures. God chose instead to go all the way and to fully enter the waters with us.

The waters of baptism that have cleansed you and me connect us with those waters that Jesus entered in that far away river in more than a merely symbolic way. When Jesus was baptized, a really extraordinary thing happened. Mark describes it like this: "And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" In clear terms, in not to be misunderstood terms, Jesus hears that he is the Son of God, that he is beloved, and that he belongs to God. In this moment and by these words, Jesus knows for certain whom he is and to whom he belongs.

In our baptism, we too discover who we are and to whom we belong. In this sacrament of God's love for us, we discover that we are children of God, that we are loved by God, and that we belong to God. Listen to the words we use in the baptismal rite.

We pray that God will

"Grant that all who are baptized into the death of Jesus...may live in the power of his resurrection."

As the water is blessed we pray

"that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior." By the way, if anyone asks you if Episcopalians are born again – the answer is "yes" – at our baptism. And that is enough!

After the completion of the water rite we thank God that God has

"bestowed upon these your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised them to the new life of grace."

As the priest marks the sign of the cross in blessed oil on the forehead of each newly baptized he or she says

"...you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever."

Through our Baptism,  
 we participate in the life of God,  
 we know that we, too, like Jesus, are beloved daughters and sons of God,  
 we know that we belong to God.  
 Forever.

The Spirit that anointed Jesus at his Baptism is the same Spirit that seals us in Baptism and marks us as Christ's own forever. The Spirit that Jesus received at his baptism propelled him into a life of servant ministry. Through the Spirit, Jesus discovered what he was to do with the rest of his life. As we receive that same Spirit in our baptism, the Spirit lets us know what we are to do with the rest of our lives, too. Now God may have a specific plan for each of our lives, but God hasn't let me know that for certain yet. What is certain is not so much the details of choices we will be called upon to make in life, but the general direction that those choices are to take. We get our instruction in our Baptismal Covenant.

We will renew this Covenant shortly, with water splashed upon us to remind us of our own Baptism. We promise, with God's help  
 To continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread,  
 and in the prayers.  
 To persevere in resisting evil, and whenever we fall into sin, to repent and return to the Lord.

So far so good? We've promised to come to church, receive communion, and to pray. And to try not to sin, but when we do, to return to God. OK?  
 We also promise, with God's help

To proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.

To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.  
 To strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

These are more than mere suggestions or helpful hints about how to live. These are promises we make, for ourselves and for our children. These promises make up our response to God's grace-filled love, love that we can never earn, love that we probably much of the time don't deserve, and love that we can never manipulate or bargain for. Love that simply comes, unbidden and unbought.

St. Stephen's parish mission statement is printed on the cover of our worship bulletin. It says simply that our mission is to know, to love, and to serve Christ.

Another way to say it is that in our lives we seek to know Christ and to make Christ known. We do that most directly, most simply, and most purely by our manner of living. St. Francis and others are said to have stated, "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary use words."

Let your life show Christ to others. And the place to start is closest to home. It is easy to say we will love and serve and strive in the abstract. Easy to say we can love those we don't know, or see, or live with. But how about promising to proclaim by word and example God's love for our spouse, our children, our parents.

To seek and serve Christ in those closest to us, those with whom we share a bed, a home, a workplace, a classroom, a team, a community, a church.

To strive for justice and peace in our own family, in our own household, and to respect the dignity of those God has placed most directly in our lives.

To always look for the good in one another.

To always ascribe the best, and not the worst, motives to one another. Someone observed that we judge others by their actions, but judge ourselves by our motives. Try looking for the best motives in others, too.

To celebrate the miracle that through God's grace God has put others in our lives who most clearly are trying to show God's love to us. If we will but see it.

You see, when we can love those most closely related to us, we can reach out in love beyond ourselves to serve a world in need.

Like we have done with the Angel Project. Like we have done with our Caring is Sharing. Like we have done with our Outreach ministries. Like we will do later this month with Winter Nights shelter program, and later this year with Shelter, Inc.

These are concrete ways we can show love to others, others we do not even know. For there are always opportunities to show love to others.

The simplest description of the Christian life is that we,  
by the way we live, by what we do,  
so much more than what we say,  
that we make love known.

Jesus the Christ identified with us in his Baptism by climbing into the river with us. To be a Christian is to so closely identify with Christ and to so closely identify with one another, that we like Jesus will go to any length to show – to show and not just to say – “I love you!”