

First Sunday After The Epiphany: January 10, 2021
The Baptism of Our Lord

Sermon: Remembering and Celebrating Our Baptism

“The Lord shall give strength to his people; the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.” Psalm 29:11

Well this certainly has been an incredible week in our lives and in our nation. We witnessed on Wednesday something that I don't think any of us could have ever imagined happening. It was shocking and deeply disturbing to see our nation's capital building, the cherished monument of our democracy, being desecrated and vandalized. We grieve the deaths of four people, including a police officer who was killed while trying to protect our elected leaders and their staff. We grieve the harm inflicted on innocent people, who were injured in the riot. We grieve the wounding of our democracy and we struggle to discern the best way forward for all of us. What can this shocking and disturbing riot and insurrection in our nation's capital teach us about what we must do as faithful Christians as we move forward? We can find answers in the wisdom of our scripture.

It's truly a blessing that our scripture today is that for celebrating the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. These readings remind us who we are as followers of Jesus and the extraordinary gift we have received as baptized Christians. I'm also reminded of the wisdom of Martin Luther (1483–1546), who was the founder of the Protestant Reformation more than 500 years ago. Like us, he lived during a time when there was immense disparities between the rich and poor, corruption among the wealthy and powerful, deep divisions and disunity among people, and violence. He faced a time of great personal crisis, as well as a crisis within the medieval Roman Catholic Church. He had the courage to speak up for the values he cherished as a Christian. Despite the efforts of church leaders to silence him, Luther provided the theological foundation for a radical reform of the Christian church. His theology and beliefs influenced the history of the Christian church in Europe and beyond.

Although he was immensely influential, it was not easy for him. He struggled at times with despair. During those difficult and anxious times, Martin Luther would scribble on his desktop. “I am baptized.” He told everyone: “Remember your baptism!” He understood that if we are baptized, that is all we will ever need. When we are feeling discouraged, anxious, or fearful, it is helpful to remember our baptism and remember that through the holy sacrament of baptism, God adopts us and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church. We become God's beloved children.

The details of Jesus' baptism by his cousin John in the River Jordan are profoundly important and are recounted in all four Gospels. As Jesus came up from the water after his baptism, the heavens suddenly opened, and the Spirit of God descended like a dove alighting on him. A voice from heaven said: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11) God feels the same way about each of us.

Like Jesus, we are baptized through the same Holy Spirit that descended upon Jesus like a dove. The heavens may not have opened wide at the time of our baptism and a dove may not have descended from the sky, but we are equally graced, filled with the Spirit, and

adopted as God's own children. God created us in God's own image and God loves us unconditionally. God sent his own beloved son to be with us and to die on the cross to save us from our sins.

God publicly affirmed for Jesus and for the world that he was truly God's son and beloved by God. This affirmation was important because it came just before Jesus entered the wilderness to discern his call from God and before he began his public ministry. God was calling Jesus to dedicate his life to a ministry of serving others, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, welcoming the stranger and foreigner, standing up for justice for those who are persecuted, and helping those who are marginalized. When we are baptized, we are invited to follow Jesus' example of ministry in God's world.

Baptism is fundamentally a missional act; it's an act of stepping out with Christ to serve others. Baptism is "... 'a solidarity plunge' in the waters of Jordon that flow through our neighborhoods today; that is, a commitment to walk in solidarity and compassion with others, sharing their hopes, tears, joy and pain."ⁱ There is a great deal of pain and suffering in our nation today. There is a great deal of disunity and fear. It's important that we think about how we as faithful followers of Jesus can walk in solidarity and compassion with those who are suffering.

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has offered words of wisdom, comfort and hope. He reminds us of the last book written by The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community. It was his fourth and last book published before he was assassinated in 1968. In this book, Dr. King argued that we must always choose community over chaos. Our hope is found in the beloved community that God dreams that we might have. Beloved community is about building God's kingdom on earth; it's about God's will being done, not our will. The beloved community is about unselfish love that seeks the well-being of all people. It's about following Jesus' command to love our neighbor as we love our self and about loving our enemies. Jesus' life and ministry show us the way of love; this is our way of life as faithful followers of Jesus

Jesus' way of love is embedded in our baptismal vows as Episcopalians. At the time of our baptism if we were baptized as an adult or when we renew our baptismal vows, we commit to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, love our neighbor as ourselves, strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.ⁱⁱ If we dedicate our lives to helping others in the same way Jesus did, we contribute to building the beloved community. If we work together in our parish, with others in our community and diocese, we can transform our communities, we can bring much needed help to people who are suffering, we can strengthen unity to overcome divisions, and we can transform our lives and our community. During this coming week, take time to think about how our lives and parish might be transformed, if each of us dedicate ourselves to building the beloved community by following Jesus' example of the way of love.

O God most holy, in Jesus Christ you have laid a foundation upon which to build our Lives: Help us to follow your perfect law of love, that we may fulfill it and observe it to the end. **Amen.**ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Christopher Duraisingh, "Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church," Anglican Theological Review, Winter 2010.

ⁱⁱ The Book of Common Prayer, p. 305.

ⁱⁱⁱ Daily Prayers for All Seasons, (New York: Church Publishing, 2014), p. 52.