

Baptism of Our Lord
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Living Our Baptism

Christmas is over. We celebrated Jesus' birth 14 days ago. The wise men have followed a star in the heavens and arrived to see Jesus. We celebrated that event two days ago on Friday. So it's somewhat perplexing that today's gospel has Jesus, as an adult, being baptized in the Jordan River! Whoosh! For Star Wars fans it's as if we've taken the Millennium Falcon to light-speed and traveled through hyperspace to land at this river scene. We know that historians place Jesus's age around 30 at the time of his baptism. So, in two weeks, we've jumped three decades in the story of his life.

Here we are, contemplating this act of ritual cleansing performed by John and accepted, indeed insisted upon, by Jesus. And, I'd like us to contemplate how we share in this same act with Jesus. It's unique, our sharing with him this act of baptism, but we do. The other sacrament we all share is our shared Eucharistic meal, where we remember his act of inclusion with his disciples, of a meal like no other and like every other. Baptism, too, is an act of inclusion. We are joined with Jesus through our baptisms. Our baptismal vows give us the guidelines to act as children of God. I talked about this back in a December sermon, but to refresh our memories here's what we promise - we renounce evil and sin and whatever draws us away from the love of God. We accept Jesus as our Savior promising to follow and trust in him. We promise to continue teaching his ways, to spend time together in prayer and fellowship and in sharing the Eucharistic meal. So that's what happens when we are baptized into the life of the church, when we begin our new life in Christ.

But let's go back to the river for a bit. When Jesus is baptized, the Holy Spirit appears and God the Father speaks. God, in the form of the Trinity, tangibly manifests. Jesus is identified as the Son of God, with whom God is pleased. The Holy Spirit is physically present in the form of a dove. The voice of God, longed for by many, is heard. And Jesus, the Messiah, is standing in the water of the Jordan River, submitting himself to baptism, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah.

Our Old Testament reading this week is from Isaiah. We are given a description, a prophecy, of who Jesus will be and what characteristics he will have. The overarching purpose for this savior which Isaiah identifies is to bring justice. Listen again:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;

a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;

This is such a tender description. In order to bring justice, Jesus won't scream and shout. He won't take advantage of people who are "bruised" or "burning dimly". He will bring forth justice and not weary of the task. WOW. He will bring about justice while being aware of those who are "bruised" or whose flame is "burning dimly" I have bruises and I'm sure you do, too. In many cases we can hide our bruises, but not always. Physical bruises can generally be covered with clothing. Emotional and psychological bruises are disguised differently. To discern them, a person must be a good listener, a compassionate presence. Isaiah's description is of a very emotionally astute and gentle man. Isaiah is telling us that God has put his spirit upon him and that his job is to bring forth justice on the earth. So, it is this man, Jesus, with whom God is well pleased. When the flames of our spirit are "burning dimly" this savior will not douse our flame, but will work faithfully on our behalf..

Jesus begins his ministry just after his baptism. He's about to go out with his ragtag group of disciples to teach love to the children of God. His ministry continues to direct our ragtag idiosyncratic, quirky selves. He works with our weaknesses, our stumbles, and our distinctive stubbornness. And we are told, he will never grow faint or be crushed. He will always be working to bring justice, the fullness of life, to each of us.

When we are baptized as adults or as children we, too, begin our ministries. We live with the promises we made, or that our Godparents made, and try to bring justice to the world in whatever ways that we can both large and small. We can bring justice by giving an encouraging word to someone who is mourning. Or by swallowing a sarcastic remark that we really want to make. We can bring justice by sending an email to the Office of Security Personnel at the Fort Lauderdale airport telling them that we are praying for them - and the really pray for their recovery from the trauma they witnessed. We also bring justice as we celebrate the Eucharist, our remembrance and communion with Jesus. That is because the entire liturgy points toward healing, peace, love, justice.

I recently read an incredible story about a very unique Eucharistic meal that I'd like to tell you about. In July of 1969, Apollo 11 blasted off from the earth. The mission's purpose was to land on the moon. Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong landed the Lunar Module named "Eagle" on the moon on July 20. Before the mission, Aldrin talked with his pastor and together they made a plan. Aldrin would take a small amount of consecrated bread and wine and a tiny chalice to the moon. When the LM landed, Aldrin asked those listening over the radio to pause and contemplate the event that had just occurred. He asked them to give thanks in their own special way. A year later he wrote about what he did next. "In the radio blackout, I opened the little plastic packages which contained the bread and the wine. I poured the wine into the chalice our church had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the side of the cup." Then he read, and Armstrong listened to Jesus' words from the Gospel of John: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whosoever abides in me will bring forth much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing." Ten years ago, when Aldrin was asked about this in an interview, he said, "I ate the tiny Host and swallowed the wine. I gave thanks for the intelligence and spirit that had brought two young pilots to the Sea of Tranquility. It was interesting for me to think: the very first liquid ever poured on the moon, and the very first food eaten there, were the communion elements."

By his actions, Mr. Aldrin was living out his baptismal vows. He was, through the Eucharistic meal, giving thanks and acknowledging our shared life in Jesus, praying for all of us on the blue and white planet that he could see suspended in the darkness of space.

To make wine, grapes must be bruised. Jesus will take the bruised parts of our lives and with tenderness and compassion, make them into wine which can be consecrated to be shared. God will take the joy of our lives to sweeten our actions in striving for justice. Do what you can, where you can, wherever you find yourself. We are challenged to bring forth fruit in our lives in partnership with God. It is unlikely that any of us will find ourselves on the surface of the moon, (though we have some very precocious children in this congregation) but we can act out our baptismal vows, here, on this God created earth in ways large and small. Let's think of it this way, if we abide in God, the scales of justice will be filled with fruit. Fruit, grown in the waters of baptism. Through this lustral water we join with Jesus to bear divine fruit which has eternal implications. Through baptism we can do what seems impossible - bring forth justice to the nations.