

*“Remember Your Baptism!”*

The Baptism of the Lord

January 9, 2011

Matthew 3:13-17

Rev. Peter Shidemantle

I remember that as a child I had this way of hanging on to the really big days of the year, like my birthday, but especially Christmas. Christmas would come, and a few days would go by and I'd figure that there'd been only one Wednesday since Christmas, or there'd been only one week since Christmas. Sometimes I still do it, though now that I'm older maybe I have other reasons for wanting time to pass more slowly. Gradually, of course, I had to let go of Christmas, and wait for the next big day to arrive.

My mom was always the one who after the holidays would snap the household back into reality, ready us all to get back into our regular routines. On New Year's morning the tree came down and all the decorations packed away, everything made ready for the onslaught of ordinary living.

We're well into the new year now. Kids have been back to school for a week, and January calendars and task lists are packed with all those things we put off until “after the holidays.” (Let us be merciful with one another this month!) The church year moves back into one of those periods we call “ordinary time.” The first Sunday of ordinary time is always given to the story of the baptism of Jesus by John. It seems that the gospels, no less than our holiday observances, do not permit us to linger long at the manger. Except for the brief episode at the temple in Jerusalem when Jesus was 12, the next scene after Jesus' birth is his readiness as a fully grown and mature adult to take on the responsibilities of messiahship by submitting to John's baptism in the Jordan River. A few short years are all he will have to accomplish all that

was wrapped up in those centuries of expectation. At Christmas we sang in the verse of “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” And now the “hopes and fears” go with him into the waters of baptism, to rise up again met by words from heaven: “You are my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

He is “God made flesh” we say, and we might mean it with all our hearts while he lay there in a manger, but we discover that to take him seriously as an infant we have to take him seriously as an adult as well – which means that our own faith cannot linger either in its infancy, but must grow up as well, must be “enfleshed” in the living of our days.

A new year has begun. It is another beginning, another chance, another opportunity. It seems that God is generally pleased with beginnings. In describing the baptism of Jesus, Matthew echoes the act of creation as described in the book of Genesis. In the beginning, after the creation of the sea and dry land, God said, “It is good.” After the creation of the light and the darkness, the stars and the moon, God said, “It is good.” After the creation of the birds and the animals, the plants and the trees and the fish of the sea God said, “It is very good.” After the creation of man and woman in God’s image God said, “It is good, very, very good.” And after the baptism of Jesus there is the same delight in the heart of God; after his total immersion into the human condition God says, “This is good. This is delightful. This is the Beloved, who brings me great pleasure. This is very, very good.”

It’s only 60 years since my own baptism, not very long as God measures time. I’m still trying to live into my baptism. Though I don’t remember a thing about it, I believe that when I was baptized it brought great pleasure to the heart of God, and I believe that God’s blessing has rested on me every day since – I believe that for you, too – whether or not you are baptized.

Your creation was all that was needed to gain the blessing of God. Baptism, however, is the affirmation, the sign and the seal of that blessing in the community of Christ's people called the church.

It is so important to remember that blessing, for those who are baptized to remember that we are baptized. Whether we were sprinkled by the waters of baptism, or dunked in them – whether it happened when you were an infant or when you knew enough to be able to speak for yourself – it wasn't something in any case that we had much control over at the time. It's the way each of us entered the Christian community – unencumbered, completely vulnerable – and God was well pleased, not because of anything we had done, but simply because that is who God is. When we were baptized we came up or we came out on the other side of things. The Bible talks about baptism as being buried with Christ, and being raised with him, so that now we are “in Christ,” and he is in us. We are one in that way, one with each other, and one with him. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, I understand, those who were baptized in the same font became siblings, considered the same flesh and blood, kin with one another. Whatever the tradition in which we are baptized we receive the same spiritual name – Christian – bearer of Christ, brother, sister of Christ. It's our family name, and it is given as pure gift, to the pure delight of the giver.

It's so important to remember that we are baptized because sometimes we relate to life as if we have seen it all before – as if the sun coming up in the morning holds no surprise, as if the stars of night did not reflect the loving touch of our Creator. It is important to remember that we are baptized because some days we simply accept that hungry children, and abused women, and ethnic hatred, and young people dying on the streets of our city, and public officials and bystanders gunned down - and all kinds of evil and ugliness are simply the way things are in the

normal course of time and events. We've been raised up from the water on the other side of things so that evil, though it should never surprise us, should never be accepted as simply the way things are and will always be.

It's important to remember our baptism because our tendency, as time goes on, as life goes on, as we become encumbered with resumes and responsibilities, as we become accustomed to the way things are, is to try to keep our feet dry, to stay out of the water so we won't have to let go of all those other things that we think define us. We don't want to risk falling in and losing control. Maybe we become more fearful of God's judgment than we are grateful for God's acceptance and delight, and so holding on becomes more important than letting go. Maybe we become more concerned with God showing himself to us than we are with giving ourselves to him.

Wouldn't we rather cast our lot with God's delight? The way is difficult, yes, but nothing makes more sense and brings more peace, once you're on the way in baptized living, or on your way again. Jesus said his yoke is easy and his burden is light, which is one of those amazing paradoxes of following the suffering servant – and one you can't really know about until you get yoked and start carrying his love around. You see, with Anthony Robinson, I think we are “a people hungry for a proper submission, a submission to God's plan and purpose for our lives, and a break from trying to determine only ‘what we want to do with our lives.’” (*Tony's weekly reflection on the Sunday texts*). Once you are yoked and start carrying his love around, the questions begin to change. What does God want? What is God asking of me? What is God enabling in me, preparing in me? How can I minister in God's name in this situation? How can I show the love of Christ in the midst of fear or lust for revenge?

This is a new year, a new day – another chance to step into the depths of baptized living. There is really no time that is “ordinary” once you’ve gotten wet. Every day we are bathed in the mercy of God. Every day we are washed clean of the sin that keeps life small and safe. Every day is the opportunity to be lifted up, not by our own strength, but by the love that makes all things new.

Remember your baptism, and be thankful!

Amen.

*(After the sermon: In many Christian traditions, the Baptism of the Lord is a day when people are invited to renew their own baptismal vows, and to come again to the font of blessing. In the next few moments, I invite any who would choose to do so to come forward to receive the blessing of water on your forehead as a sign of renewal and re-commitment to live a baptized life. And let us all be in prayer that the church of Jesus Christ in this place would be faithful in our calling to love and to serve both God and neighbor in this coming, extraordinary year.)*