

First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord

January 11, 2009

Lessons: Psalm 29; Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

Today is the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany, and also the day that we celebrate The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ. And both the reading from Acts and the Gospel reading addressed the subject of baptism. Clearly this seems to be an important subject.

So let me ask a question. How often do you, or do we, pause to think about baptisms? Jesus' baptism, the baptism that John was performing, or even our own baptisms? How often do we really consider what the impact of baptism might mean for our lives? It is important, because Baptism, along with the Eucharist, are the two primary sacraments of the church.

So this morning, let's do that. Let's take a few moments and think about baptism, and let's begin with the baptism of John. Our reading from Mark's Gospel tells us:

*“John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”*

What is your first reaction when you hear the words “sin” and “repentance”? Is your reaction more positive or more negative? Do you think of these words as more useful or more old-fashioned and a bit of a turn off? Do these words bring a certain visual image to mind? It matters quite a bit how you perceive these words, because your perception will impact how you apply them to your life. And in reality, these words can be very helpful for all of us.

So this morning, instead of using the word “repent”, try to think of how it is frequently described. Think of it as stopping, turning around and going in the opposite direction. Doing things differently. And think of “sin” as missing the mark, missing the target.

J.B. Phillips, in his book *Your God Is Too Small*, introduces the concept of sin and repentance with an interesting idea. Phillips begins by reminding us of Jesus' command that we are to love God with our whole heart and mind and soul, and that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. He wrote:

*“It is obvious, if we accept Christ's two great principles (loving God and loving neighbor), that ‘sin’ will lie in the refusal to follow them.”*

Phillips then goes on to suggest that the most significant cause of not loving God and our neighbors is self-love, selfishness. We put ourselves ahead of God and neighbor. This is important, because Phillips then points out that if we really think about it, as individuals we are not isolated units and our every action in some degree affects other people. As we act in self-centered versus God-centered ways we impact the quality of life all around us.

Phillips then offered some examples of how our behavior, whether we are aware of it or not, and whether we intend to or not, may impact the quality of life of other people. Listen to these two examples, and see if they create even a small vibration in your heart. He writes:

*“We will suppose that a man who is rather proud of his ability to knock off a quick effective little painting discovers a bit of canvas fastened to a wall. For his own pleasure and the appreciation of his friends he rapidly paints in a bright, effective, and amusing little picture. Stepping back to see his own handiwork better he suddenly discovers that he has painted his little bit of nonsense on the corner of a vast painting of superb quality, so huge that he had not realized its extent or even that there was a picture there at all. His feelings are rather like what a man feels when he suddenly sees the vast sweep of God’s design in life, and observes the cheap and discordant little effort his own living so far represents when seen against that background. That is real conviction of sin.”*

*“To illustrate the second way in which a real sense of sin may come, we will use a story...A young man of the ‘incorrigible variety grows up work-shy, and by a certain native quickness of wit manages for years to escape serious trouble. His favourite saying is: ‘I live my own life, and I don’t ...care about anybody.’ Eventually, however, his self-confidence overreaches itself and he is convicted of serious crime and goes to prison for three years. While in prison he is hard and quite unrepentant. ‘What I do with my life,’ he says defiantly, ‘is nobody else’s business. I shan’t make the same mistake twice.’ In due course he leaves prison and, since he has nowhere else to go, decides to spend a few nights at home while he ‘looks around.’ He hasn’t seen his mother since he saw her, plump, rosy, and tearful, out of the corner of his eye, at his trial. But when the door of his home is opened to him by a worn, grey-haired old woman, he does not see at once what has happened. For a second or two he simply stares, then he cries, ‘Oh, mother, what have I done to you’” and bursts into the tears that neither punishment nor prison had ever wrung from him.”*

St. Paul has written that we all have sinned and fallen short of the mark. John the Baptizer’s message was for us to recognize that fact, admit it and then change our ways of living. Scottish New Testament professor William Barclay wrote:

*“(John’s) message was effective because he told people what in their heart of hearts they knew and brought them what in the depths of their souls they were waiting for.”*

Is there anything in our lives that we might want to acknowledge and begin to do or express differently? Something that might be more self-centered than God or neighbor centered? Is there a new direction, a new path that we might want to take?

And what about the baptism that John the Baptizer said was coming? What about the baptism that St. Paul spoke about? Listen again to the words that John spoke today in Mark's Gospel. Speaking of Jesus, John said:

*"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."* And then a few verses later we heard:

*"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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.'"*

Is that important? Is being baptized with the Holy Spirit important? It sounds like it must be, because years later, St. Paul made an issue of it. In this morning's reading from Acts, St. Paul said to some disciples in Ephesus:

*"'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' They replied, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' Then he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They answered, 'Into John's baptism.' Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them,..."*

In Luke's Gospel Jesus tells his disciples: *"I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."* And in the first chapter of Acts Jesus says to them: *"...wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

So what does all of this mean to us? Disciples then and disciples today, us, receive the power to be and do what we are called to be and do by the power of the Holy Spirit. And we need to remember that when we were each baptized, a Bishop or Priest placed hands upon our heads, said our name and then said: *...you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever."*

As we leave church this morning, let's think about Baptism. Let's remember that as individuals we are not isolated units and that our every action, in some degree, affects other people. If we need to change direction in order to be more God centered and more neighbor centered, let's try to do it. And let us also remember, that we have each been given the power through the Holy Spirit to do what we are called to do and to be what we are called to be. We are not alone. We need to remember that. And...give thanks.

AMEN