

1/8/12 Year B: First Sunday After Epiphany
St. John's, Jamaica Plain

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

I think about baptism a lot. It seems that I've always thought about baptism a lot. As a child going to both the Roman Catholic Church with my mother and the Episcopal Church with my father, I heard a lot about baptism. Not all of what I heard made sense to me. I remember having lots of questions, like:

- What did it feel like when the devil snatched your soul if you weren't baptized? (courtesy of some of the scarier teachings)
- What did it feel like to be saved through baptism?
- What happened to children whose parents either didn't know or, worse yet, didn't choose to have them baptized?

and , these were and are the biggies -

- What does baptism mean to God? What does God say to us in baptism?

These questions have stayed with me. Periodically these questions push themselves into the forefront of my thinking. This usually happens at somewhat obvious times - when I was asked to be my niece's godmother, when my own children were born, when I was asked to talk about my Sacramental theology as part of the discernment process for postulancy. As I said, I think about baptism a lot!

More recently, as a chaplain in a high-risk neonatal hospital, I've been a part of many conversations about baptism. We seem to have more questions than answers, including:

- What is it exactly?
- Who is it for?

I admit that I find these conversations, had with other chaplains, social workers, medical staff, and patients, fascinating. More importantly, I realize how relevant and real they are. This has been especially obvious when I have been asked to baptize dying or stillborn babies. The questions about what it is and who it is for are particularly meaningful to those families.

Although technically baptism is a Sacrament for the living, i.e. the living candidate, I've started to think about the living much more broadly. I'm interpreting the living to include the grieving family members of those stillborn children, and the nurses and doctors who assist their entry into this world. They need such reassurance that this child, loved so abundantly by his or her family, is also a beloved Child of God. They need to have the sky open up and God speak directly to them, as we hear in the Gospel today. Their need for God to say to their child and them, "**You** are my child, the beloved; with **you** I am well pleased" is almost palpable.

Baptism is for these families one of the ways in which they can go on living after such a profound loss. It is an affirmation that their little one is loved by God and part of God's family now and forever. Although their child will not be with them in this life on this earth, their love for their child is no different than the love of any other parent for any other child. Baptism is a way in which that reality is affirmed.

When I think about the families I have been so privileged to meet and to serve at the hospital, some of my deepest sadness is that these parents do not have the opportunity to share this time with others. They are doing it without the family and community support and affirmation we have come to understand as so important in our Episcopal tradition.

And then I find myself back to my childhood questions. I'm comfortable telling you that, although those questions from childhood have lingered for about 45 years, I am not sure about the part where the devil snatches the souls of the unbaptized. So, if baptism isn't to prevent the snatching of souls, what is it for? I'm especially interested in thinking about what baptism means to us and what does it mean to God?

I have knowledge of some of the basics, as I'm sure you do, too:

- Baptism is one of two Sacraments we celebrate in the Anglican Communion. The other is the Eucharist;
- We say that Sacraments are the "outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace";
- We understand "grace" to be a gift from God, freely given by God to God's creation; we do not have to, nor can we, earn grace;
- Although Sacraments are typically the purview of priests, anyone can baptize in an emergency. The rubrics in the Book of Common Prayer give us the information we need about what to do when; and
- **Baptism matters - it is transformational.**

The 1979 Book of Common Prayer expanded our theology around baptism. No longer do we celebrate baptism just as the cleansing of souls through the affirmation of our faith in the Triune God. We still renounce evil. And now we make commitments about what we are going to do **after** we are baptized. We commit to sharing the fellowship and the bread. We commit to spreading the Good News of the Gospel. We commit to a way of living.

Baptism is not simply a ritual, a one-time welcoming of a beautiful baby or child or adult, into the family. Baptism is the **beginning** of our mutual ministry, the ministry of the baptized, which is to be God's hands and feet in the world. Baptism is one

way we acknowledge God's invitation into God's grace. God invites us to live into relationship with God through our faith in Jesus by the power of God's Holy Spirit. Baptism is often the first way in which we say, "Yes, God. I want to live that way with you."

For infants and children too young to understand and make that commitment on their own, parents, godparents, and families accept the invitation on their behalf. Baptism is often the first way parents and families publicly proclaim their desire that their child live that way with God. They commit to helping their child understand what it means to live with the abundance of grace that is God's love for us. And those of us honored to be present commit our support to embrace the child in our community, in our Christian family. That is one of the ways in which we remind ourselves and each other that we, too, have received and are committed to accepting God's invitation to be in relationship through our faith in Jesus by the power of God's Holy Spirit.

Jesus showed us through his baptism in the Jordan River how to surrender ourselves to God and to accept this incredible invitation to new life! Why else would Jesus get baptized? He was already the perfect incarnation of God, fully human and fully Divine. When Jesus lets John baptize him (John - a mere mortal like you and me) Jesus is telling us what it means to accept the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace. And, just in case we miss it, God opens the skies and shouts what God knows we all need to hear: that we are God's beloved children and with us God is well pleased.

So...do we -can we - believe that we are God's beloved children? If we can, if we do, how do we show this in the choices we make each day about how to live into our relationship with God and with each other? This is a HUGE invitation, the acceptance of which means we can no longer think of our lives as "business as usual." When we

chose to believe this about God and about ourselves, it means that we have to live our lives with real intention to show ourselves and others that God's love for us gives us what we need to live the new life that we have in Jesus.

All of those stories and parables we read in the Gospels - all those examples of Jesus' radical love for the people - tell us how to go on living with this awesome awareness of who and **whose** we are. Unlike the babies I've met whose lives end before they begin, we sometimes struggle with figuring out how to live well into the reality that God's love for us defies our wildest dreams and imaginations. Yet we have opportunity after opportunity to try to get it right. Jesus models for us, in his baptism and in his life, how to live a new, **transformed** life.

The big questions for us now are:

- Are we willing to accept the invitation into the ministry of the baptized and do those things we commit to in the Baptismal Covenant?
- And are we willing to live each day of our lives as if this is truly the most amazing news we have ever heard?

AMEN.