

A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church,  
Oak Park, IL by the Rev. Paris Coffey on January 9, 2011 (Year A)  
The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord

Readings: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

*Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.* Matthew 3:13-15

In the Episcopal Church, most of us don't remember our baptisms, since we were typically infants at the time. We might (1) have pictures, of course, (2) recall stories, (3) or keep a signed certificate stashed in a drawer somewhere; \* but for the most part we must piece together details of this sacramental moment in our lives. Actually, baptism is more than a moment; it's a lifelong journey, which is one reason we baptize infants in the Episcopal Church. Baptism is the first step on a spiritual path – that if we're blessed – we'll spend a lifetime trying to understand and follow. This means that baptism is never just intellectual assent to Christian Creeds and doctrines, which we must be comfortable with or fully comprehend at the get-go. Rather baptism is our launch down a river of discovery into the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus Christ.

Such discovery takes a lifetime, with baptism just the beginning. That said, it is a momentous beginning into which we plunge with a public intention of faith. We declare our intent to follow the way of Jesus, or in the case of infants, to assert our intention as parents and godparents to raise this child in the way of Christ. Either way, the bond that God establishes in baptism is indissoluble, and so this "outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace" is administered only once. It's administered just once by water and the Holy Spirit, but renewed continually by us as we seek to live into our Baptismal Covenant and take *our* part in the worship, mission and ministries of our own church community and the world in which we live. What does this mean, though, "to take our part" – to follow the way of Jesus? Moreover, what did it mean for Jesus, who despite the fact that a week ago he was just a baby, is now a grown man? A lot has happened this week between last Sunday's celebration of

the Epiphany – the magi’s visit to the Christ Child– and today’s Baptism of an adult Jesus who arrives on the scene for the first time. John the Baptizer is already on stage, as Matthew makes clear in today’s Gospel. “Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him,” writes Matthew, adding, “John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” John clearly recognizes Jesus and resists, “But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented.” John’s resistance is remarkably short-lived, but ours may well persist as Matthew stretches previous perceptions of baptism.

Mark, for example, which most scholars believe was written first, portrays John’s baptism as forgiveness for sin, which John himself perceives to be the case at first. In Matthew, on the other hand, John comes to see baptism as something more – at least for Jesus – who says to John in Matthew that “it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Righteousness here means to do the revealed will of God, and “us” refers to partnership between John and Jesus. Both individuals are necessary for God’s vision to be realized; both must say “yes” to God’s Son’s plunge into the muddy waters of humanity; which they do, once John overcomes resistance. Resistance, though, can be more persistent for some, as many New Year’s resolutions attest.

Take, for instance, the resolution of the man (who will remain nameless) who (1) vowed in 2007 “to get my weight down below 180 pounds.” Failing this, he (2) resolved in 2008 “to follow my new diet religiously until I get below 200 pounds.” (3) In 2009 he adjusted this plan, asserting, “I will develop a realistic attitude about my weight,” and (4) last year promised instead, “I will work out three days a week.” (\*) This year the man has lowered his goal to what he’s sure he can reach. “I will try to drive past a gym at least once a week,” he has pledged for 2011, and by George I think he’ll do it. Lowering goals, after all, is one way to achieve them, although it only strengthens our resistance. In contrast, facing our resistance strengthens possibility – especially in partnership with God.

I wonder, what *is* it that we resist? What is it that prevents us from seeing/from realizing God’s plan? For John, it was a limited view of baptism that prevented him at first from seeing and thus participating in the revealed will of God. For us, it may well be the same, though not just a limited view of baptism. Rather it may be a limited view of

our own worth and of the importance we each have in sharing God's vision for the world, which when you think about it, IS a limited view of baptism. After all, if baptism tells us anything, it tells us that we are children of God – part of God's FAMILY – and as such God depends on us and empowers us to fulfill God's vision for the world.

We are important – essential even – to a better world as I realized this past week when I read Robin Denney's Epiphany post on her blog. An Episcopal missionary, working as the Agriculture Consultant for the Episcopal Church of Sudan, Denney is currently based in the city of Juba in southern Sudan. Voting begins there today – as it does throughout Sudan – on a referendum to decide for unity or separation of this country's northern and southern regions. Denney's post addressed this vote in light of concerns that the referendum will NOT bring peace. After all, Sudan has a long history of violence and civil war, resulting in the deaths of 2-million-plus people and the displacement of 4 million more in the past 40 years. It's why our church has been praying weekly for Sudan, and our companion Diocese of Renk, which is especially vulnerable, resting on the proposed border.

In fact, churches across our Diocese, all over the country, and hopefully around the world have been praying, including those in Sudan. As Denney wrote three days ago, "Saturday January 8, is a day of prayer throughout south Sudan, (and) I fully expect people from all over Sudan, north and south, to spend (this day) in prayer." What's more, she adds, "I know we will be joined by the prayers of people from all over the world. And I . . . expect . . . the fruit of that prayer will be the miraculous presence of the Peace which passes understanding." Denney goes on to write that, "Prayers have already been answered. (1) Logistical problems seem to have been surmounted, and (2) some fighting factions in south Sudan have put down their arms. (3) The Archbishop was instrumental in negotiating a recent peace deal with one such group. (4) And all the dioceses of the Episcopal Church of Sudan have been promoting peace, and educating their people about peace."

Educating people can "fulfill all righteousness," Jesus might say. It can accomplish the revealed will of God for peace, as can negotiating, praying, or simply taking seriously whatever part our partnership with God invites. It's different for each of us. We don't have (1) the same gifts, (2) the same strengths, (3) the same life

experiences, or (4) the same passions. We do, though have baptism in common – and if we *don't*, we can change that together right NOW. We have water, the Holy Spirit, and the invitation of Jesus Christ. Nothing more is needed; nothing that is, except (like John) our willingness to overcome resistance, and there is no time for that like the present. What's more, there's no encouragement like prayer, and so I pray this morning that we will live into our "yes" to God, remembering that for child and adult alike, baptism is an ongoing journey/an ongoing discovery into the way, the truth, and life of Jesus Christ that leads to possibilities we have yet to even imagine. ***Amen.***

Let us pray.

O God, whose care reaches the uttermost parts of the earth:  
use *each* of us, we pray, to fulfill your vision for the world;  
and use the prayers we offer, that your care might enfold the people  
of Sudan today and in the days ahead as they vote for their future.

We humbly beseech you to graciously behold and bless all those in  
Sudan, especially the children.

Surround them with your loving care  
and defend them from all dangers of body, mind and spirit.

Kindle in every heart the true love of peace,  
and grant that your holy and life-giving Spirit  
may so move the hearts of the people of Sudan  
that barriers which divide them may crumble,  
suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease;  
so that healed of their divisions, they may live in justice and peace.

And grant that both they and we, drawing nearer to you, may be bound  
together by your love, in the communion of the Holy Spirit, and in the  
fellowship of your saints; through Jesus Christ our Lord. ***Amen.***

Adapted from "A Prayer for Sudan," by St. James' (NYC) African Action Study Group