

A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Oak Park, IL
On January 8, 2012, the First Sunday after the Epiphany,
The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Year B) by the Rev. Paris Coffey

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." Mark 1:9-11

Once John dunked Jesus into the river Jordan over 2,000 years ago, baptism became a time-honored sacrament of the Christian Church. In fact, it's unusual this year – on one of the Church's Principal Feasts of Baptism – not to have any candidates at St. Christopher's. We almost had two, but life is unpredictable. Plans change, especially when babies are thrown into the mix, as Mary and Joseph found in Bethlehem.

Still, eight days later these two had had their baby circumcised and named him Jesus, just as God had planned. We honored this event last week, and yet today this baby's all grown up. In fact, unless you came to church on Friday, you missed the Magi's visit altogether. I left them up so you would know they made it, but today the church moves on – moves on into the ministry and mission of an adult Jesus, which is the only Jesus that interests Mark.

Indeed, at the outset of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is an adult. There are *no* birth narratives in Mark as there are in Luke and Matthew. Rather, it is John's Baptism of Jesus in Mark that announces the Messiah and initiates the Christian story. It announces God's straightforward love for humankind – for unlike *our* church's baptismal rite with its grand ceremonies, solemn processions and endorsed certificates – Jesus' Baptism aligns God *unceremoniously* with sinners.

"People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to John," writes Mark, "and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." Likewise Jesus, whom we confess to be without sin, lines up with them, plunging himself into the Jordan in an act that binds God's life to ours. You might say that it immerses Jesus in the human condition, for "plunge" and "immerse" are richer words and symbols for baptism than are "pour" or "sprinkle," which is what we do at St. Christopher's.

Certainly, sprinkling gets the job done, but compared to immersion it doesn't convey the same intensity, as even my computer recognized. Clicking the thesaurus-key for the word "baptized," it spit out synonyms like "plunged, doused, soaked, immersed and finally drowned." It seemed to understand that baptism meant there was no holding back – no getting a *little* wet/a *little* involved. Rather, baptism draws us fully and completely into the life of Christ, just as human sin drew Jesus without reservation into ours.

It drew him into the muddiness/the messiness of life, although the Church's reservations have hinted from the beginning that we're not sure whether we want Jesus in the middle of that or not. "What if Jesus is mistaken for one of *them*?" we

worry as he lines up on the Jordan's banks with sinners. Jesus, though, isn't worried, for to Jesus the Incarnation – God made flesh – means that God- is-with-us not just in the clear skies of heaven, but in the muddy river of life. “Get wet,” Jesus bids us as he dives into the Jordan. “Don't hold yourself apart,” for in truth Jesus understands that it is *we* who fear being mistaken for “one of them,” not him.

And he is right, as I learned in seminary when I worked as a chaplain in a group home for schizophrenics. Much of my job entailed simply hanging out –making myself available by keeping company with the residents. I didn't wear a collar; nothing set me apart. And yet I was shocked and more than a little embarrassed when a visitor mistook me for a member of the group home.

“Oh, I'm not one of *them!*” I stammered. “I'm a chaplain.” Jesus would have answered differently, for in his baptism, Jesus announces to the world that he is one of us – part of the whole human race – part of the homeless, the poor, the broken, the discouraged; part of the LGBT community, the divorced and those in prison. In other words, Jesus joins his life to those from whom *we* are tempted to distance ourselves, but who are part of us and part of God.

We're all part of something greater, as we will be reminded in a few minutes when we process *ceremoniously* to the font to renew the vows that bind our lives to God and one another. We will reaffirm the promises we made – or that were made *for* us – when we first plunged into the life of Christ. We'll hear straight questions probing our relationship with all humanity; and we will answer with words that reflect our radical dependence on the One who joined God's self to us in Jesus Christ – in Bethlehem, in Baptism, on Calvary, and in the dailyness of life.

“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” we will be asked. “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” And we will answer, as we have answered many times before, “I will with God's help,” We will answer – knowing even before we speak – that God is with us to help, for why else would Jesus have lined up with sinners and plunged himself into the Jordan, if not to stand *with* us and *for* us in the river of life? *Amen.*