

## We Have Come to the Waters

We move today officially from the season of Christmas to the season of Epiphany. The Feast of Epiphany, celebrated by many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world, falls on January 6<sup>th</sup> each year and is the celebration of the arrival of the three kings with gifts for the Christ Child. On a deeper level, the Feast of Epiphany commemorates that visit as the time when Jesus was first recognized as the Son of God by representatives of the nations of the Gentiles. Epiphany, some of you may remember, comes from a Greek word meaning manifestation or the appearance of a god. The Syrian tyrant who caused so much bloodshed for the Jews in the Intertestamental period, Antiochus Epiphanes, adopted that second name because he believed himself to be the manifestation of a god on earth. But in our Feast of the Epiphany, we rejoice over the true Incarnation of the true God, the Second Person of the Trinity, Christ Jesus.

The manifestation or revelation of Jesus as “God With Us” is the theme of the entire season of Epiphany, stretching from January 6<sup>th</sup> to the moveable feast of Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday, after which Ash Wednesday takes us into the Season of Lent. Traditionally, the Church has returned each year to the remembrance of some specific events in Jesus’ life during this season – events which helped reveal him to his contemporaries and to us as the Son of God. The final Sunday in Epiphany, for example, is the customary time to hear the story of the Transfiguration, when Jesus appeared to his closest companions enveloped in shining white light and accompanied by those great servants of God from centuries before, Moses and Elijah. This first Sunday of Epiphany is tied to the event that marked the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, his baptism.

The story of Jesus’ baptism is one that is almost impossible to resist preaching for a lifelong Baptist like me. Nevertheless, I intend to do just that this morning. I’m going to assume that most of us know that story pretty well. If you need a refresher, you can find the narrative in the third chapter of Matthew or Luke, the very beginning of Mark’s Gospel, or by allusion in the first chapter of John. Instead of re-telling that very familiar tale, I want to focus this morning on another baptism story in the Book of Acts and on imagery in the Book of Isaiah that relates to baptism. The question I want us to consider this morning is not, “why was Jesus baptized,” or “how is our baptism like or unlike his,” but rather, “as those who have been baptized in accordance with Jesus’ command, how are our lives impacted by that event?” We are those who have come to the waters. How then, shall we live?

Let’s start with that story in the Acts of the Apostles. Just prior to the passage I read a few moments ago, there is a story of an eloquent and learned Jewish-Christian named Apollos. Apollos was from Alexandria in Egypt and had apparently encountered followers of Jesus and found their way of life to be compelling. In these early days of the spread of the Good News, there were, as there are today, many differences in how the adherents to the Way of Jesus practiced their faith. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that although Apollos “spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus ...he knew only the baptism of John.” As a result, the converts he initially made in Ephesus were also baptized in the style of John. This is the group that Paul encountered on one of his visits to Ephesus.

Now, this raises the following questions: What was the baptism of John? How did this differ from baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus? And why should we care? In the Gospel according to Luke, the author of Luke and Acts records these words of John the Baptizer: “I baptize you

## We Have Come to the Waters

with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” For these early Christians, as indeed for us, the understanding was that baptism served in a number of ways. First, the immersion was symbolic of sin and an old way of life being washed away. This was also the understanding of those who came to John for baptism at the Jordan. Second, baptism was an act of solidarity and initiation into a new community. This was true for Jews even before John as baptism was used as part of the rite for proselytes into the Jewish faith. For those baptized by John, the new community was that of those renewing their commitment to the God of Israel and, indeed, those two understandings continue for Christians. We, too, by baptism enter into a community pledged to the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel. But for Paul and for all Christians who have subsequently followed his teaching, the act of baptism also marks us as members of the Body of Christ. We now carry, along with the mission of our Ascended Lord, the same Holy Spirit which descended on him as he emerged from the waters of the Jordan.

I want to follow these same threads for a bit through the wonderful poetic language of the Book of Isaiah. I’ve had a wonderful time for the past several months working my way through that longest of prophetic books in the Bible in order to teach from it on Wednesday nights. It is a book that Jesus quoted from often and his very life echoed and manifested Isaiah’s vision – the Word, if you will, made flesh. The passage from Isaiah that we used as this morning’s Call to Worship (Isaiah 12:2-6) and the two passages that I read earlier all contain references to baptism and to its deep meaning in our lives as Christians.

Just as John would later call for people to come to his baptism of repentance, just as Jesus would command his disciples to baptize others, so Isaiah calls all people to the waters and foresees a time when God’s people would be blessed by the waters. In our Call to Worship this morning, we affirmed, “With joy we draw water from the wells of salvation.” In Isaiah, this is phrased as a promise for the future: “With joy you *will* draw water from the wells of salvation.” As with every good metaphor, these words evoke multiple truths. Our salvation ultimately lies in God, who is the true well of salvation. Jesus named himself as the Water of Life, the water which, when drunk, brings eternal and abundant life and an end to thirst. We followers of Jesus have symbolized this deep truth by an act of entering into a physical well of literal water in baptism. Jesus’ offering of himself as that water that quenches our deepest spiritual thirst also evokes the words of Isaiah 55:1, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters...” We invite those who are spiritually parched to come and be baptized, to enter into relationship with our God and with us, and to find in those relationships the pathway to the rich and everlasting life we term “Salvation.”

This new life, into which we are raised to walk after our symbolic dying and being buried in Christ in the waters of baptism, is marked by the presence in our lives of the Holy Spirit. Now the gifts of the Spirit to each of us can be quite different. Luke says that when Paul baptized the twelve believers in Ephesus, “the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.” Now, in all the baptisms I’ve seen or participated in, I’ve never known anyone to emerge from the water making ecstatic utterances. Indeed, I wouldn’t expect such a thing around here. Thanks to the Scandinavian heritage of many of you and the Nordic influence on Seattle culture, I think the most ecstatic utterance I’ve ever heard in these environs is the occasional “Uff da!” But we have been known to raise our voices in song in this place and even

## We Have Come to the Waters

occasionally to clap our hands. Personally, I take this as a powerful sign of the Holy Spirit's movement, just as Isaiah said, "...the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." This is not to imply that y'all are either stone-faced or wooden.

Seriously, though, I do find in this congregation ample evidence of the movement of the Holy Spirit, what Paul called the fruits of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Whenever we see these attributes in the lives of others, it means the Holy Spirit is moving in their lives, whether they recognize it as such or not.

It is a reminder to us who are baptized that we share in the experience of Jesus. Just as the Spirit came upon him at baptism, so it is with us. The words of Isaiah 42:1 are echoed in the Gospel accounts of Jesus baptism, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights," but they are rightly applied to each of us as well. When we choose to follow Jesus, we, too, become God's servants. God chose us, all of us, and the Spirit of God delights in us. We are truly the joint heirs with Christ to the Kingdom of God, the inheritors of the Beloved Community.

When we think of the Christian life in this way, with these blessings, it is easy to understand the call of Isaiah in chapter 55 as he addresses the word of God to those who are living without the blessings of the Spirit in their lives: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food." Jesus told his disciples that he was the Bread of Life. In our life in Christ, we experience a foretaste of the heavenly banquet of God that awaits all creation. Why indeed should we put our time and our energy into things that do not ultimately satisfy? This is the old life from which we have been released as signified in baptism; we are buried in Christ and raised to walk in newness of life.

Our experience of baptism sets challenges before us as well as promise. There is an ethic to baptized life that is heightened as compared to the way of life followed by those who are not yet alive to the Spirit. John's baptism, experienced by Apollos and those believers in Ephesus, gives witness to this. Luke records that the crowds gathered to hear John asked him, "What then should we do?" "In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise... Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.""

Likewise in Isaiah 42, we find the broad strokes of God's charge to God's servants. When these words were originally delivered, Isaiah likely meant them for a contemporary servant of God. Perhaps, as we've discussed on Wednesday nights and as I mentioned in a sermon a few weeks ago, he was speaking to Zerubbabel, a descendent of David who had been appointed governor over Judaea by Cyrus of Persia. Later, Isaiah's words were associated with Jesus, the ultimate Messiah of God. But now that we, the followers of Jesus, are Christ's Body on earth, I hear these words applying to all of us. Listen. "I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations." If the Holy Spirit is come upon us, as promised by the Scriptures, just as it did upon Jesus, then God's justice is now our task. How do we define that justice? "A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench..." Just like God's servants

## We Have Come to the Waters

throughout the ages, just like Joseph of Nazareth, just like Jesus, compassion and mercy are to guide us always. We must support the weak and the broken and nurture them to wholeness. God says, “I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations...” Jesus said to his disciples, “You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Through Isaiah, God gives us specifics on how to be that light to the nations: “to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” Jesus quoted Isaiah in giving his mission statement to the people at the synagogue in Nazareth and now, Body of Christ, his mission is ours: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

It may sound daunting, to be that lamp on the lampstand, giving light to the whole house, to be among those bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives and sight to the blind. It may sound demanding, this ethic of the baptized. And yet, we can take heart because just as with Jesus, the Spirit of the Lord is upon us. Just as with those confused Ephesians, who didn’t know quite what they were getting themselves into when they accepted the baptism of John, God has blessed us in our baptism into Christ Jesus with the presence of the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to do things we could not otherwise have imagined. For us, the baptized, all things to which God calls us are possible because Christ strengthens us.

And what for those who are not yet baptized? What for those who have not yet committed to following Jesus, making his way their way through life and trusting in him for abundant and eternal life? There is good news for them, too. Isaiah brings a word from God saying, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price... let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” Jesus said, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened... Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” John the Revelator had a vision of Christ and his Church and they repeated the invitation: “Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.”

My sisters and my brothers, the invitation is for all; the challenge is for all; the promise is for all. We are the baptized and we are charged to live our lives so that people may look through us and see our God, so that people may see in us the abundant life that all desire. We are empowered to live in this way by the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives. All we need do is open ourselves to the Spirit’s working and begin to shine. And in the power of the spirit, we will find the love of God and the joy of Christ and the peace of the Holy Presence. Let us go out in joy and be led forth in peace. Amen.