**January 12, 2014 – The Baptism of our Lord**

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Today, the first Sunday after Epiphany, is the day where we celebration the baptism of Jesus by John. It’s one of the four days where, if the timing is right, it’s especially appropriate to hold baptisms – the others being Pentecost, the Great Vigil of Easter, and All Saints’ Day.

So today, we focus on baptism – what it means and why it’s important to us. We really could focus on some aspect of our baptism almost every Sunday, since our baptism affects every aspect of our life in Christ. But today we’ll focus on Jesus’ baptism as it relates to us.

Starting with today’s Gospel, we find Jesus on the banks of the Jordan waiting to be baptized by John. By the time Jesus gets there, John had been preaching and baptizing for some time, and his message was pretty specific – repent, repent, repent!

“Bear fruit that befits repentance,” he told the Jews who came to hear him. “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And when he wasn’t telling people to repent, not to mention calling the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers (no doubt endearing himself to them in particular) he was preaching about the coming of a Messiah.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Then along comes that very Messiah and what’s the first thing he wants to do – be baptized in the Jordan, by John! This probably confused John a lot, since he was convinced that Jesus would be the one baptizing from then on. But Jesus says it’s to fulfill all righteousness that he should be baptized first.

Then the special effects happen. The sky opens up and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descends and lands on Jesus – right on his head – and a heavenly voice announced that this was God’s Son. And this was the spectacular start to Jesus’ earthly ministry.

But why, do you suppose, was it to fulfill all righteousness that Jesus had to be baptized? John’s baptism was for repentance – he’d been preaching almost exclusively on that theme for his whole ministry. But Jesus, the Word, the Son of God, was sinless. He had nothing to repent. So why would he need to be baptized?

To answer that, I want to take a look at our own tradition of baptism. But first, a little Church history. VERY little, I promise, but this is important to this discussion. During the Reformation, there were many differences of opinion on all aspects of theology, including Baptism. There are libraries full of books on this topic, so this is the very abridged, Cliffs Notes version.

Basically, the theology of Baptism split roughly into two camps – those who felt that the sacrament of Holy Baptism was a requirement for inclusion into the Body of Christ, and those who felt that baptism was the logical next step AFTER one had developed a personal relationship with Jesus. The Anglican Church followed the Roman and Orthodox tradition that baptism was required first. Weirdly enough, Martin Luther, who started this whole Reformation thing, also kept to that tradition.

So, much as we’d like to wear our Protestant hat often, we are Anglo Catholics and one of our primary doctrines is that we believe in “one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” We also believe that the Holy Spirit, that same Holy Spirit who descended upon Jesus at his baptism, is a vital part of our baptism.

But let’s get back to Jesus and why he had to be baptized by John. I believe it’s partially about the water. As those of you who have gone through confirmation probably remember, we describe all of our sacraments as outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace. In the sacrament of Holy Baptism, the outward and visible sign is the water.

Water really is life. We can go for a couple of weeks without food, but only a couple of days without water. Our bodies are mostly made up of it. But water is also dangerous. Just ask anyone who’s lived through a flood or who has nearly drowned. We know that it’s possible to drown in only a couple of inches of water.

So water is both death and life. And that’s the nature of our theology of Baptism. We go through the waters, through death, and rise up into new life. So by being immersed in the waters of the Jordan and rising again, Jesus is starting out his ministry with an illustrated prophecy of his own death and resurrection to come.

Then there’s the water itself. In our baptismal tradition the bishop or priest recites and ancient and beautiful prayer called the Thanksgiving over the Water, which contains many references to moving through the water, and moving from death to life:

We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.

We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Then, right after that prayer, the priest asks the Holy Spirit to sanctify the water to prepare it for baptism. This prayer and sanctification is our representation of what Jesus does at that first baptism. By entering the water and being baptized himself, he has made all future baptisms – including yours and mine – holy and sanctified. His was the baptismal archetype – the precursor to all baptism for all time, just as his resurrection is the precursor to all resurrections at the coming of the Kingdom of God.

And finally, there’s the Holy Spirit’s role. John was prophesying the coming of the Messiah, and Jesus IS that messiah. The word Messiah, or Christos in Greek, means the anointed one. In Judaism, all rulers and prophets were anointed as a symbol of their earthly authority. After Jesus goes through the waters of baptism and rises again, the Holy Spirit descends onto his head. This is his anointing – his commissioning for his earthly ministry – and as if this weren’t sign enough, God himself names him as his beloved Son.

So there’s a lot going on in these four short verses – Jesus foretelling his own death and resurrection, Jesus sanctifying the water of baptism by his very presence in it, and Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, being anointed by God to carry out his ministry on earth.

And all of this is recreated with every new baptism we do, and is remembered every time we renew our baptismal vows, like we did when Bishop Tarrant visited us in December. We have moved through death into life by immersing ourselves in that sanctified water.

And we, too, have been commissioned to an earthly ministry. This is where this all comes home to us right here and right now. By following Jesus through those waters, and by being anointed by the Holy Spirit, we are bound to do his work here on earth.

I know I’ve quoted this poem from St. Teresa of Avila before, but I haven’t found another one that so perfectly sums up this idea:

*Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

By our baptism, modeled on that first baptism, we are called into service – to be Christ in the world. This is a huge responsibility, to feed the hungry, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to take care of the sick, and to visit those in prison. But it’s also a huge joy. It’s a joy to serve others, and a joy to serve God. We went into the water to have our sins forgiven, but we came out to follow Jesus.

Amen.