

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

On this first Sunday after the Epiphany, we celebrate the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. Each of the Gospels includes this scene, and each give a little different sense to the event. In Luke's Gospel, John calls the people to repentance, and they are washed by the waters of the River Jordan as a symbol of the need to be made clean and whole and new.

But John washes with water only, and there is really no change in the person who is washed by John's water....it is the same person after all. And yet, Jesus came to the River Jordan to be baptized by John, and one of the great questions of theology is just why Jesus came to be baptized.

Matthew explains it as the need of Jesus to fulfill all righteousness, to so identify with a sinful humanity that Jesus also makes a symbolic confession and is baptized. Luke does not give us a reason in so many words, but explains it as symbolic act not for cleansing, but for ordination and being set apart for his role as Messiah and coronation of sorts as King.

Most of us are only vaguely aware of the coronation ritual, and it has now been more than 60 years since Elizabeth the Second was crowned queen of the United Kingdom. In the coronation ritual, the monarch is washed and anointed with oil, which sets the king or queen apart for their rule. In Queen Elizabeth's case, the Archbishop of Canterbury poured oil on her forehead and her hands and then placed the signs of rule upon her – crown and scepter and orb and ring. These rituals are very ancient, going back to King David and even earlier. The prophet Samuel anointed David, and Saul before him, with blessed oil. It is a sign that the person is set apart for kingship.

In the same way, Jesus is recognized as the Messiah at his baptism. And in his baptism, during prayer, the heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends and alights bodily upon Jesus as a sign of the power of the Holy Spirit and a voice comes from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased."....as the audible voice of God declaring Jesus to be the Beloved of God, causing his ordination as Messiah and Lord. This event, celebrated by us today, is his consecration, his ordination, his coronation for his earthly ministry.

The high point of the gospel reading is wonderful. The voice. "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Pleased at what? Jesus had not done anything yet...no miracles, he had not preached or taught or healed. He had not done any of those things we identify with his ministry. And yet God says, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Interesting, is it not, that God praises Jesus before he does great things? We often reverse that order, reserving praise and approval until one has earned it...EXCEPT for our children. Loving parents start with those words of affirmation and affection right from the beginning. "My Son/Daughter, whom I love."

As usual, we are challenged to consider the implications of these messages from Scripture...to ponder and wonder to what extent, and even how and way there is some connection...some relevance for us today. And our liturgy this morning is somewhat different in that we take the opportunity to renew our own baptismal covenant...to restate the theological understanding of the Church in such a way that, hopefully, will speak to each of us...in a meaningful, and intimate way, so that we might come into our own Epiphany.

A key ingredient for our understanding this morning is to realize that, like Jesus, our own individual baptism also sets us apart. Jesus was born Immanuel and Savior, but through the ritual of baptism, Jesus was ordained for his role as Messiah.

As for us, we are born creatures of a loving God, but also part of a fallen humanity. And baptism is God's way to restore us to be truly God's children and heirs to the Kingdom of God, because when you and I were baptized, it was in the name of the Triune God...in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, when we were baptized, it was not the same as that experienced by those going to the Jordan River to be baptized by John because we are baptized not with water only but with God's Word and by God's command.

We are baptized with water, but like Jesus before us...who was the first...we were also baptized by the Holy Spirit and fire to give us power and courage and strength to live our life with God and be the people of God. At our baptism, right after the water, we are also anointed with oil...coronating us, consecrating us...baptized to follow Jesus in our commissioning for the Lord's service just as Jesus was baptized as part of his own commissioning as Messiah and Lord.

Fred Craddock, a teacher of preachers, told the story of vacationing in the Smokey Mountains area of Tennessee, and wrote: "We were at a place called the Black Bear Inn, sitting and looking out at the mountains, when this old man with pure white hair came over and asked, "You are on vacation?" We replied, "Yes," and he asked, "What do you do?" Well, I was thinking that it was none of his business, but I let out that I was a minister. Then he said, "Oh, a minister, well I've got a story for you." He pulled out a chair and sat down. He said, "I was born back here in these mountains and when I was growing up I attended Laurel Springs Church. My mother was not married and, as you might expect in those days, I was embarrassed about that. At school, I would hide in the weeds by a nearby river and eat my lunch alone because the other children were very cruel...and when I went to town with my courageous mother I would see the way people looked at me, trying to guess who my daddy was.

"The preacher fascinated me, but at the same time he scared me. He had a long beard, a rough-hewn face, a deep voice, but I sure liked to hear him preach. But I didn't think I was welcome at church so I would go just for the sermon. And as soon as the sermon was over, I would rush out so nobody would say, 'What's a boy like you doing here in church?'"

"One day though," the old man continued, "I was trying to get out but some people had already got in the aisle so I had to remain. I was waiting, getting in a cold sweat, when all of a sudden I felt a

hand on my shoulder, and I looked out of the corner of my eye and realized it was the face of the preacher. And I was scared to death. The preacher looked at me. He didn't say a word, he just looked at me, and then he said, 'Well boy, you're a child of...' and he paused, and I knew he was going to try to guess not who my mother was but who my father was."

"The preacher said, 'You're a child of...um. Why, you're a child of God! I see a striking resemblance, boy!' He swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Go, claim your inheritance.'" And then the old man who was telling the story said to Fred Craddock, "I was born on that day!"

"You are my Son, whom I love." Terms of endearment from that voice...and not just for Jesus alone....but terms of endearment for each of us as well.

In baptism we find our affirmation. Remember that as we recall our own baptism in the service this morning. That is where we find strength for the struggle, courage for the crises, and hope for the future.

We are part of the family of God. Each of us is God's own child. Never alone from God....and nothing can separate us from that love of God in Christ Jesus all the days of our lives. Reason enough, it seems, to make it a very big deal...a very big deal indeed...when we are privileged to witness, and include our own covenant, within the sacrament of baptism when we get the chance to celebrate one here at this very parish....baptized and blessed for a lifetime of love in the company of the family of God, in return praising God in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.