



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Epiphany 1 Year B

#### Christ's Own for Ever [RCL] Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Today, we commemorate the baptism of Jesus by his cousin John in the River Jordan. Now, John's that guy we've been hearing a lot about lately (since the beginning of Advent), and after today, he will drop into the background.

You see, we no longer need that voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord." For the Lord is here, born on earth to save us. And we no longer have any confusion about who is the Messiah, for the one more powerful than John has come.

Now that babe is born. Incarnate and among us.

John's role as prophet, foretelling the great story of salvation as known in the person of Jesus Christ: well, that role is fulfilled with Jesus' baptism today.

John is sometimes seen as the last of the old order: the last prophet in the line of Isaiah and Jeremiah, the last to baptize with water only and not also the Holy Spirit, and the last to demand repentance before the immanent coming of the kingdom of God.

For Jesus proclaims over and over again that the kingdom of God has drawn near us; it is *here*, and *now*. No longer coming, or far off, or even just the other side of a thin divide—but *here*, very near us.

Among the very first documented acts of his earthly ministry, the twelve-year-old Jesus picks up a scroll and reads from an earlier prophecy of Isaiah: that the spirit of the Lord has anointed him, and that he has been sent to announce good news to the poor—and that this prophecy has been fulfilled. "Today, in your very hearing this text has come true," he says.

So, too, of this baptism of Jesus: it seems to have effected a radical transformation in him. Luke's gospel tells us of his birth, and then nary a word until now—thirty years later. And from this moment—the moment of a simple ritual of living water—Jesus is changed. No longer just the carpenter's son, no longer a refugee in Egypt, no longer just another human being to walk the face of the earth.

He moves on from here to teach in synagogues and have all people sing his praises. He will heal the sick, and make the dead live again. He will preach, and manifest miracles. He will astound people with his teaching, and confound us even today by submitting to a shameful death on a cross.

And he will appear again over forty days until he ascends into heaven, prophesying of his return in glory to judge the earth—a second coming we still anticipate, two millennia later.

One day people know him as that clever boy, Joseph's son. And the next he's revealed as the Christ, the Messiah, the chosen one—God's son, the beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

In his baptism, Jesus seems to have become an entirely different person.

It's as if the waters of his baptism have washed away what was hiding the true Jesus. The running water of a river has somehow changed him, made him manifest as who he truly is, and given him the power and inspiration to begin a mission and ministry that will forever change the world.

So, too, with our baptism:

- Oh, none of us is the Christ, but each and every one of us is the beloved, with whom God is well pleased.
- And each and every one of us was forever changed and transformed in our baptism.
- And each and every one of us continues to be changed and transformed—in ways big and small—throughout our earthly ministry.

Now filled with the Holy Spirit, we—like Jesus—are commissioned and sent forth to proclaim the good news of God's favor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim that the time of God's favor is here.

That's our job: to live baptismally.

And, living baptismally: what is that all about?

- It's about knowing that we have been forever changed by the acknowledgment of God's working in our life;
- that our true and holy self has been revealed by the washing away of all stain of sin;
- that we are grafted into the body of Christ's Church;
- that we have been given an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works.

We are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own *for ever*.

Baptism is an amazing gift. By the waters of baptism, we are lead from death to life, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life. 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.<sup>1</sup>

And baptism is also an awesome responsibility. We are also no longer simply to live as ordinary people in the world:

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<sup>1</sup> From the Thanksgiving over the Water in *The Book of Common Prayer* [1979].

- We are to boldly confess Jesus as Lord and Savior;
- to strive for justice and peace among all people;
- and to seek and serve the Christ in everyone we meet.

Those of us who profess and call ourselves Christians are called to live a different kind of life, a life set apart from the world around us and yet somehow also very much in its midst.

A life of grateful thanksgiving in the face of victory—and defeat.

A life of difficult forgiveness—in the face of bitter betrayal.

A life of ongoing repentance—in the face of our chronic mistakes.

A life forever changed—and forever changing—proceeding from strength to strength, from goodness to perfection, from death to life.

This wet, earthly act, involving people in relation to one another, bodies acting and touching one another, hands, clothing, oil, and light: This emotion-filled rite we call “baptism” is the means by which we declare:

- our *separation* from an old identity,
- our *transition* from being no longer one of the old order to not yet being fully one of the new, and
- our *incorporation* into the full life of the community we know and proclaim as Christ’s holy church.<sup>2</sup>

It is now for us—the baptized, those grafted into the life of Christ, those sealed and set apart—to share in an eternal priesthood, to rejoice at our adoption as children of God, and to give thanks for the ineffable mystery of our salvation.

Through baptism, we are forgiven, loved, and free to become more fully who God has created us to be: living members of Christ’s body, incarnate examples of divine love, manifestations of God’s glory here on earth.

By baptism, the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled—in Jesus, and in each one of us. God looks at us—the beloved, with whom God is well pleased—and says, “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of God has risen upon you.” Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel V. Stevick, *Baptismal Moments; Baptismal Meanings* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1987), 116.’