

## Baptism of Our Lord / 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Epiphany (Year A)

I can't recall if I've told you about this part of my life, or not. When I was in high school, I worked at a craft store named treasure Island, I don't expect you to recognize the name – it was an east coast store, the kind of place where you could pick up yarn, Christmas trees, ornament, beads; basically it was Hobby Lobby before Hobby Lobby - and without the politics.

It was a decent job, it put gas in my car, and being one of the grunts, there's really no other word for it, I was often tasked with decorating the store, putting out new displays and the like. I always had a difficult time with the holidays came around because it felt as if though I was never able to live and remain in any given season.

You don't have to work in retail to know this phenomenon. No sooner are children done trick-or-treating, than our stores become adorned with pilgrim hats and turkeys, and before Thanksgiving is done, we're already thinking about Christmas, and Black Friday deals. And as we've just experienced Christmas is over, but I kid you not, Christmas day – Target - I saw an ad for Valentine's Day!

Okay that's enough grouchiness for one morning!

It's no secret that the church goes through seasons, however I'd like to think that we move through them with a little more grace – while the world around us speeds by with impatience, church seasons offer stability, and even comfort. We get used to the colors, the flowers, which banners hang, and even as it is with Advent – which candles are lit. So, when in the midst of our familiarity something like a baptism occurs, we take notice, because its out of the norm. The Paschal candle gets lit, a banner adorns the Christ Candle, and we usually see an infant decked out in white.

Baptisms may not happen every day, but when they do, we are given the chance to remember our baptisms, we are reminded of God's never-failing grace, and we are given a chance to bask in the mysterious nature of God and how God works his grace through the waters of baptism.

The passage from Matthew is somewhat mysterious. It's mysterious because the scene that unfolds is known only to Jesus. If you read the text, you find that John baptizes Jesus and immediately following Jesus saw the heavens as they were torn apart. *He* saw the dove descend, and *He* heard the voice that came out of heaven saying, 'with you I am well pleased.'

In the text, there's nothing to suggest that anyone other than Jesus experienced these things! This is significant because 'Jesus did not receive the

Spirit in order to enjoy privately in spiritual benefit, but rather to pass it on...' and though our baptisms we are then called to continue in Jesus' steps – we are called to pass it on, our faith, our love and our passion. It may have been that these events were known only to Jesus, but God's actions announced to the world that he no longer wanted to remain hidden in the heights of heaven, but rather he chose to descend to the depths of earthly life to be seen by the likes of us. And though the person of Jesus, God has been revealed. And whether we know it or not, God is revealed every time we celebrate communion, confess our sins, and baptize. All three of these actions reveal God's love and grace, but they also contain God's affirmation.

If you think back to your baptism, you probably don't remember the heavens being torn open. Unless you were outside there were likely, *zero* doves, and chances are you didn't hear God's voice, at least in the booming operatic way it's depicted in the movies. Through human eyes baptism is a fairly simple action but it has enormous significance.

Put in the simplest way 'the power, benefit, fruit, and purpose of baptism is that it saves. For no one is baptized in order to become a prince [as Luther puts it], but as the words say, "to be saved." [And] to be saved [...] is nothing more than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, to enter into God's kingdom, and to live with him forever.' (LC 459:24-5) - and this...entering into God's kingdom and living with him forever is the point of the second benefit - *being redeemed from death and the devil*.

It happens from time to time where people knowingly or not, view religion, God, church as a type of eternal salvation insurance – that if, I only do, the *right* thing(s), that if I pay or invest into this system then, all is peachy. To which I say, you're missing the point – there's that *control thing again!*

Worse yet, and again, knowingly, or not, people misunderstand that God is not on a divine retainer for our every want. And Yes, God does provide *daily bread* – all our *needs*, but that promotion, car, those things we covet – nah. And place that aside, because there is truly something of great value – a promise, that, whenever we call upon God, we are promised that God will be present -how exactly – well, I'll have some questions for God when I get there – but in the meantime – we rest on Jesus' words – *I am with you, even until the end of the age*.

God's love isn't an insurance policy, it is a *promise*. We are promised - in our baptism that *we are saved -full stop. Saved from eternal death, and saved from the clutches of sin, and the devil*.

Sometimes hearing these words isn't enough. Sometimes we simply aren't able to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ – but that doesn't mean God's love isn't present.

Much like the scene in Matthew, we may not be able to see the heavens open up, but they did! It's not every day you read about the heavens being torn, is it? Come to think of it, you've probably only read about such an event in Scripture. So, when we speak about this it wasn't some small thing, It doesn't mean that Jesus saw a little door ajar miles up in the sky. 'Heaven' in the Bible often means God's dimension behind ordinary reality. It's more as though an invisible curtain, right in front of us, was suddenly pulled back, so that instead of the trees, flowers, and buildings, or in Jesus' case the river, the sandy desert and crowds, we are standing in the presence of a different reality altogether.

Living into our Christian faith is no different.

*Now, believing that reality is real, and living into it can be difficult. It relies upon God's grace, and the faith our Lord gifts us.*

*But as difficult as it may be, our baptisms pull back the curtain. When we're baptized, we are called to see the world differently. We're not called to be naïve – but we're called to look at the world and to see what God saw in creation – to see that It. Is. Good. Such that when we see someone begging for food, we don't question their motives – we don't say “you should have done this or that” but instead ask – how does my baptism, how does God call me to respond? That when a friend is in need you simply give, that when everything about our world tempts us to escalate, to exude bravado, and to see the worst in each other - we are called to peace – to remember that the reality of God's Kingdom is one that sees all people as God's children. And God's kingdom will have truly broken in and our baptismal calling more fully realized – when all believe that God weeps when any of his children, are hungry, oppressed, or killed. But, until that time – our baptism calls us to live into that hope. And because those waters fell on my head and God sealed me with His grace I am given, we are given the holy calling to be messengers of Christ's grace, knowing that because the heavens were torn open for Christ the living God looks at us, at every baptized and believing Christian, and he says to us what he said to Jesus on that day: “With you I am well pleased!”*

*He sees us, not as we see ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ. It sometime seems impossible, but it's true: God looks at us, and says, ‘You are my dear, dear child; I am delighted in you.’*

In this life, we may never fully grasp the significance of our baptism, but thankfully God's actions and forgiveness aren't contingent on our willingness or

ability to believe. Through our baptism our sins are forgiven, we enter in God's family and most importantly we are baptized in the life and death of our savior. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like him. Brothers and Sisters, the heavens have been torn open, and this is the day to bask in the love they reveal!

- Amen