

Baptism of Christ (Year C): 12 / 13 January 2019

St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

The Reverend Gary Cyr

“As we renew our baptism this day, let each of us be so filled with the Holy Spirit that we are humbled by the knowledge that God calls us beloved and with whom God is pleased – not in our accomplishments or achievements that are measurable by the world’s standards – but by our fidelity to God’s love as expressed in Christ Jesus.”

Isaiah 43: 1-7

Acts 8: 14-17

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Psalm 29

And they meet again: John and Jesus. Nearly twenty-five years later the two men come face to face. Their first encounter was when Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth at which time the child in Elizabeth’s womb, who we know as John the Baptist, leapt with joy upon encountering Mary who was pregnant with Jesus, and whose response in the womb is much more prosaic than John’s. Maybe it’s a precursor to what their individual temperament would be as adults. We don’t know. Matter-of-fact, we know very little to nothing about either man’s childhood: what influenced their personality, what they were taught, who they played with, what their parent’s expectations was for each of them. So much is left unrecorded and to our imagination. All we have is a portrait of John, wild and full of vigor, proclaiming a time of judgement upon the land as God’s kin-dom in ushered in by God’s anointed One. For John, the message is repentance. Jesus, on the other hand, proclaims a message of forgiveness and reconciliation. Where one says repent, the other says choose. Taken together the message is one in which God is no longer distant but present, in the midst of the human condition, present to the human situation. This is visible in that Jesus is simply one among the gather people. He waits his turn to be baptized by John.

There is no fanfare, no herald, no retinue. Jesus is simply there, one with the crowd. In this narrative, Luke is communicating that Jesus identifies with sinners. Jesus is in solidarity with those who are broken in spirit. He is not seen as separate or set apart. Rather, he is one with marginal people. Where John's message brought hope, Jesus's message fulfills that hope. When the two men meet again after many years, we not only witness a reunion, we witness a moment of transition.

John's ministry is coming to its conclusion. Shortly after this encounter, he will be arrested and killed by the powers of his day. Jesus, takes up the torch, and carries the message further. Even in prison, though, John will question Jesus if he is the one John was prophesying. Jesus answers his cousin in a somewhat cryptic way: the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear. The ones Jesus aligns with are those in most need of healing and they receive such grace that they are healed. Some even cured. The reign of God is indeed at hand, and it all begins at baptism.

Some argue – Did Jesus need to be baptized? After all, isn't he the Son of God? As such, isn't he unblemished? Without sin? Does he need to be cleansed by the baptism John offered? What is he repenting from? All good questions, but they distract rather than inform. In his baptism, Jesus personifies God's claim upon us. In this act, Jesus is affirmed and ordained as God's liberator, the one who stands with the poor and destitute, the marginal and disenfranchised. Over and over and over again we keep hearing that message throughout scripture. We need to remember that Jesus casted his lot with the sinner. Not the righteous. Not the powerful. Not the wealthy. The sinner.

The only qualification we are given for being a follower of Jesus is baptism. There are no other criteria. God's claim upon us is not dependent on our social position, financial situation, or emotional condition. God's claim upon us is not even dependent upon our faith or belief. God's claim upon us is this: you are my beloved, in whom I delight and with whom I am pleased. It brings me to tears. That message knocks me to my knees. How am I worthy of such unconditional love and support when I am full of doubt and a sinner in the eyes of many who judge me unworthy? It truly knocks me to my knees to know that I am loved by God regardless

of my situation or condition, for Jesus aligns not with the favored and privileged, but with the humble and broken of the world. People who are a sinner like me.

And what is the first thing Jesus does upon being baptized? He prays! Just as I ought to do when knocked upon my knees. I need to be praying: thank you Jesus for this gift of love. I am unworthy of it, yet God calls me beloved. What a gift baptism is. This is a transition of baptism being a rite of passage or incorporation to one of covenant relationship. Of saying yes to God's love by which we are called to live accordingly. We make that promise in our baptismal covenant, where we commit ourselves to living life according to God's love for one another and all creation.

And the claim is not only upon us individually, it's also upon us corporately – as a church, a faith community, a denomination. We are not baptized in isolation, but in community, just as Jesus is baptized in community with those who gathered that day on the banks of the Jordan river. God's claim upon us is both individual and collective. As such, the question that arises is one where we are asked if the Church identifies with the people Jesus did? Recall that Jesus was in solidarity with the people who were broken, that he identified with the sinner. What message do we send out, both individually and as a Church? Do we associate only with those who are respectable? Those who are successful in their work-life? People who look like us, act like us, vote like us? What qualifications do we impose on the outsider who desires to be one in community with Christ Jesus here in this gathering? Are we even aware of the signals we send out?

As we recall Jesus's baptism, we also recall God's claim upon us and that we are accountable to one another and to God in living into the promises we make at our baptism. We are claimed as God's own and as such are required to living accordingly. We are invited this day to transition from individual piety to cooperate piety. We are invited into a life of prayer where we identify with those with whom Jesus identified and to welcome them into our parish life. That is part of our mission as a community of faith aligned with God's desire for relationship built upon unconditional love. As we renew our baptism this day, let each of us be so filled with the Holy Spirit that we are humbled by the knowledge that God calls us beloved and with whom God is pleased – not in our accomplishments or achievements that are

measurable by the world's standards – but by our fidelity to God's love as expressed in Christ Jesus.