

The Sunday after the Epiphany
The Baptism of Our Lord
January 9, 2022

In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.

The Twelve Days of our Christmas season are now over. The Feast of the Epiphany was this past Thursday. This is the Sunday after the Epiphany ...and it is the Sunday we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord.

There are several days in the Church's liturgical calendar that are especially appropriate for baptisms: this Sunday ... the Baptism of our Lord; Easter Sunday, or the Easter Vigil; Pentecost Sunday; and All Saints Sunday. Under the present circumstances ... with COVID rampant and in-person worship suspended ... we are not baptizing anyone today. Yet, it is a good time to be reminded about our Baptismal Covenant ... the promises we make, or are made for us, and why we make them.

Earlier this week I met with someone who has terminal cancer to plan their memorial service. They are not members of St. Cyprian's ... rather a friend I know from the neighborhood and St. Cyprian's work in the greater community. The person told me, "When I was first diagnosed the doctors gave me five years. But the cancer is aggressive, and they quickly reassessed and changed it to three years. Now it is less than a year ... really it is just months and probably just weeks before I am no longer here."

Then, Friday night Caren and I stated to watch a movie, "Don't Look Up." It is not a great movie, although lots of people are watching it. There is even an opinion piece about it in today's edition of the New York Times. However, the plot of the story is that two astronomers ... scientists ... discovered a comet that is headed directly toward this planet, and its impact will destroy the earth and every living thing on it. Not only that, it will impact the earth in just six months.

In the film, the response to this news seems to take three forms ... fright, flight, or freeze. When people hear that they have just six months to live, they either try to clean up their act and do the "right" thing before they die; or they say "The hell with it. I'm going to die so why not do anything I want;" or, they do nothing and act like it really isn't going to happen.

So, what does the imminent death of a cancer patient, or the death of characters in a movie, have to do with baptism? What does this have to do with us living through this COVID-19 pandemic, and the struggle between those who are vaccinated ... and boosted ... and those who defy the expert medical opinion? How is any of this related to our faith, and where is God in all

this? What would you do, and how would you act if you only had six months to live? Would the values by which you have lived your life change?

We just heard Luke's story of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptizer. There is a tendency to want to read backwards events like this into the Jesus story, and therefore to hear Luke's gospel describing a loving congregation surrounding Jesus as John delicately immerses the Lord in the running waters of the Jordan River. Such pictures of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan are so ingrained it might take us by surprise to note Luke's baptism of Jesus by John is just the catalyst for the bigger story of what happens immediately afterwards. As Jesus is coming up out of the water the heavens are torn open. In the Greek this is an extremely violent action. We only hear it again when Jesus dies on the cross. But as Jesus comes up out of the water at his baptism, he saw the heavens torn open, and it is in bodily form as a dove that the Spirit appears, while God blesses Jesus ... a child of God like you and me ... God blesses Jesus as the chosen one of God with whom God is well pleased.

Luke describes this John the Baptizer as what we might call a survivalist ... living in the wilderness ... clothed in a camel skin ... eating locust he plucks from scrub brush and the ground. But remember also that John the Baptizer ends up in jail for telling the truth to power, and then he is beheaded. And these words we hear this morning ... "You are my beloved" ... are echoed later in the Jesus story ... God will offer these words of assurance and identity to Jesus, and to us, one more time at the transfiguration before the journey to Jerusalem where he is betrayed, beaten and crucified.

This is about our baptism as well as the Baptism of Our Lord. Just as Jesus made a conscious choice about how he would live his life, we, too, at our baptism, make a conscious choice about the values and principles we choose to live by in our lives. Granted, some of you were baptized as infants, and your parents made the choice for you at that time. Yet, you are participating in this community of faith, and that is your choice in the present moment.

Our Book of Common Prayer puts that choice in liturgical, God-talk language and therefore it is sometimes glossed over. But the fact is that we are all going to die some day. And between now and then ... whether it be six days, six weeks, six months, six years, or sixty years ... between now and the day we die we have a choice about how to live our lives. We can live by the values and principles that make the world ... and our place in it ... a better place. Or we can just say the hell with it ... I'm going to die anyway, so I think I'll just do what feels good to me regardless of the consequences to myself and others. Or, I can just ignore the choice altogether ... I'm doing just fine as long as no one gets in my face. Our Baptismal Covenant articulates the values and principles that make the world ...; and our place is it ... a better place for everyone on this planet.

We often use our Baptismal Covenant on those special Sundays I mention before instead of the Affirmation of Faith found in our worship booklet. This Baptismal Covenant begins with the Apostles' Creed. The origins of this covenant are the catechism taught to new converts in the

early Christian Church. This covenant, like a contract, involves making a commitment ... a commitment in response to being named a blessed “child of God.”

Baptism is the beginning of our committed life ... life born out of the commitment God has for us as beloved, the children in whom God delights. That is our identity. Before we are teachers or social workers or lawyers or students or anything else, we are God's children. And after all the other titles fade away, we remain the dearly beloved of God.

We are socialized to secure our sense of self through a whole lot of things: achievements, relationships, income, success, recognition. We look in a whole lot of places to find a voice that will tell us, "You're somebody, you have worth, you have value." Most people, if they are truly honest, admit to struggling with insecurity. We want to be noticed, to be loved. And God provides family members and friends who speak that love to us. However, even our dearest loved ones can let us down. And, finally, they can die. Only one word, one voice, offers steadfast love, undying faithfulness. Without this sense of unconditional love, we continue to be tempted, often using unhelpful methods, to make our own lives worthy, noticeable, secure. And we are tempted to despair if it does not happen. Only the “Word made flesh” gives us our true identity. And God's Word comes: "I am so in love with the world, so in love with you, that I have sent my beloved Son, so you might know my love in the depths of your souls." This is a Word that can only come from outside of us ... a Word from God.

This commitment by God inspires a response from us ... our commitment to this life that leads to a better world ... what the Church calls the “holy life” that God intends for us. Here are the questions that are asked of us as we make that commitment in our Baptismal Covenant:

“Do you believe in God the Father?”

“Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?”

“Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?”

I could preach a whole sermon on just those three questions ... I know because I have. But let me say two quick things about them. First, the word that is here translated as “believe” is the Greek word “credo” ... from which the word “creed” comes from ... and “credo” means to “set one’s heart to.” This isn’t just a simple intellectual exercise ... it is an act of commitment.

Secondly, you hear me each week begin my sermons with my answer to those questions ... “In the name of the God of all Creation, the God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus, and the power of God known in the Spirit.” The value that underlies my life is that there is a force in the universe that we call “God” that set all life into existence. That same force gave birth to a man ... born of a woman ... named Jesus, and that is the same force that has given birth to each of us with the same capacity to make those same choices. And that force lives on in this universe in what the Church calls the “Holy Spirit.”

But the questions don’t end there ... these are the questions asked when we were baptized, and when we re-affirm those baptismal vows.

- “Will you continue in the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?”
 - In other words, are you committed to living your life in union with others in this world, sharing a sacred space and a holy meal with each other, and giving to the community your presence and your concern?

- “Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?”
 - In other words, will you strive to live in the fullness of God’s image, and when you come up short, will you actively choose not to live as a victim of your past mistakes, but once more commit to strive again to live into God’s image in which you are made?

- Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
 - In other words, will you take seriously what Jesus took seriously?

- Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
 - In other words, will you open your hearts and souls to see everyone else on this planet as a child of God, and treat all persons the way you wish to be treated?

- Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?
 - In other words, will you strive for justice and peace among all people ... ALL PEOPLE ... and respect the dignity of EVERY HUMAN BEING?

In Jesus’ baptism in the running waters of the Jordan River God proclaimed that he was a beloved Son ... a beloved Child of God ... and the Spirit blessed Jesus on his journey of an extraordinary covenant with the One who created him. For me, Jesus was the ultimate choice-maker, and it was his choosing to live into that covenant with God ... including up to his death. In our baptisms ... as an infant, child, or adult ... we, too, have been proclaimed a beloved child of God, and blessed in our journey of covenant with the One who created us. This morning we are reminded, once again, of that blessing ... and our committed response.

Whether we have sixty years to live ... or six months to live ... or six days ... we have a choice of to what we are going to set our heart to. Whether we are a terminal cancer patient, an anxious individual in the face of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, or a fictional character facing an apocalyptic earth-destroying comet, we have a choice. We can ignore the choice and just let life happen to us. Or, we can put ourselves first at the expense of others. Or, we can commit to a life that leaves this world a better place because of our place in it.

My choice ... our choice as one small expression of God’s work in this corner of the vineyard ... is found in our response to God’s love ... as children of God ... as beloved of God ... and pleasing to God ... committed to making this world ... and our place in it ... a better place.

In the name of the God of all Creation; the God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus; and the power of God known in the Spirit.

Amen.