

**Baptism of the Lord**  
**January 10, 2014**

**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.**

I don't know how many of you caught the news report about the 5 teenagers injured in an overturned SUV on Wildwood Drive earlier this week. It turns out that they, along with another young man only 14, had been burglarizing cars in a nearby neighborhood. When a sheriff's car appeared they fled and then tried to make a u-turn and turned the vehicle over. All five teens were taken to the hospital but none of them were seriously injured.

One of the TV news crews assigned to the story interviewed a man whose car had been broken into. What he had to say was interesting: "I hope this is a wakeup call for those kids. I did some crazy things in my youth but I turned around and I think I'm doing pretty good today. If I can do it then I hope they can do it." It was interesting to hear someone with some hope, compassion, and a belief in redemption.

Today is the Baptism of the Lord. In the Episcopal Church, and in most other liturgical churches, the Sunday following the Feast of the Epiphany is celebrated as the inaugural event of Jesus' ministry.

The story of Jesus' baptism appears in all four Gospels, and in Matthew, Mark and Luke the story each tells is almost identical to the others. This morning we heard Matthew's account of the story. We will be hearing a lot from Matthew's gospel this year. In our three year cycle of readings this is the year that Matthew is prominent. Already we heard Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus, and last week we heard Matthew's story of the magi ... the three wise men. But what we never hear in our readings is the first seventeen verses of the first chapter of Matthew's gospel ... it is the genealogy of Jesus.

Matthew begins that genealogy by name-dropping Abraham and King David ... next to Moses, the two most important people in all of Jewish history. Then his genealogy lists forty-two men in three sets of fourteen generations each. All very nice and neat. But then comes a shock. Matthew includes five women in the genealogy, and not just any five women ... these are all sexually suspicious and possibly scandalous women.

Tamar is the first women in Matthew's genealogy. Her story is told in the Book of Genesis. Tamar was widowed twice, then became a victim of incest when her father-in-law Judah abused her as a prostitute. Rahab's story is told in the Book of Joshua. She was a foreigner and a prostitute who protected the Hebrew spies by lying. Ruth has an entire book named for her. She was a foreigner and a widow who gets Boaz drunk and sleeps with him and then blackmails him into marrying her. In the Second Book of Samuel we hear the tale of Bathsheba. She was

the object of David's adulterous passion and murderous cover-up. Then, of course, there's Mary the mother of Jesus, who was unmarried and pregnant.

One has to ask, why would the author of Matthew's gospel include these women in the genealogy of Jesus? Why would Matthew want to include these flawed women? I'll address the question in a minute. Let's go back to the baptism of Jesus.

According to the stories in Matthew, Mark and Luke, after living in relative obscurity his entire life, in his late twenties or maybe early thirties Jesus left his family in Nazareth and joined the movement of John. Remember, if we read literally the birth narrative contained in Luke's gospel, John is a cousin of Jesus. Anyhow, Jesus may well have been a disciple of this John ... with John acting as a mentor. At least this much is clear about John the Baptizer ... he was an eccentric prophet of radical dissent, so much so that his detractors said that he had a demon.

Whereas John's father, Zechariah ... at least according to Luke ... had been part of the religious establishment as a priest in the Jerusalem temple, John fled the comforts and corruptions of the city for the loneliness of the desert. There he dressed in animal skins, ate insects and wild honey, preached, and baptized. Living on the margins of society, both literally and figuratively, he preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

John's preaching in the Judean desert and baptizing in the Jordan River confronted both the religious and the political powers of his day. About six months after John emerged from the desert like some scraggly lunatic and baptized Jesus, he was beheaded at the whim of Herod, who at a dinner party capitulated to the sadistic demand of his girlfriend's daughter. John was the forerunner of Jesus, but he was also a truth-teller to Herod, having rebuked Herod for sleeping with his brother's wife. But as with many perverse politicians, Herod had his way with John, who had spoken truth to power, so John was murdered.

The prophetic word of God from John the Baptist, then, did not originate with the state powers or the religious establishment, nor did it find a receptive audience with them. Instead of cooperation, accommodation, or resignation, John challenged these religious and political powers with his anti-establishment message of "protest and renewal." By joining John the Baptizer's fringe movement, Jesus did likewise.

Then comes a shock ... Jesus himself asks to be baptized by John. In this morning's reading we heard:

*Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

Why did Jesus the greater submit to baptism "for the forgiveness of sin" by John the lesser? Did he need to repent of his own sins? According to what we just read the earliest witnesses of his baptism asked this same question, because John the Baptizer tried to deter Jesus: "Why do you come to me? I need to be baptized by you!" New Testament Scholar John Dominic Crossan argues that there was an "acute embarrassment" about Jesus' baptism on the part of the gospel writers, and therefore points to the fact that it must actually have happened.

Jesus' baptism inaugurated his public ministry by identifying with "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem." He allied himself with the faults and failures, the pains and problems, of all the broken people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside them and among them ... and beside us and among us today. Not long into his public mission, the sanctimonious religious leaders derided Jesus as a "friend of gluttons and sinners." They were right about that. Even his genealogy testified to the fact that he came from an imperfect and flawed lineage ... just like most of us.

With his baptism, Jesus openly and decisively stands with you and me in our fears and anxieties. Jesus intentionally took sides with people in their neediness, and declared that God was biased in their favor. God's abundant mercy, Jesus declared, is available directly and immediately to every person; it's not the private preserve doled out by the temple establishment in Jerusalem.

Jesus' baptismal solidarity with broken and flawed people was vividly confirmed by God's affirmation and empowerment. Still wet with water after John had plunged him beneath the Jordan River, Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision ... the declaration of God the Father that Jesus was his beloved son, and the descent of God the Spirit in the form of a dove. The vision and the voice punctuated the baptismal event. They signaled the meaning, the message and the mission of Jesus as he went public after thirty years of invisibility ... that by the power of the Spirit, the Son of God embodied his Father's unconditional embrace of all people everywhere ... regardless of how flawed they may be.

That Jesus chose to identify with broken people ... the oppressed, the marginalized, the disenfranchised, those who needed healing, who were hungry, those who were on the outside of society, those who were imperfect ... that Jesus identified with these people is at the heart of our faith.

This is one of those days set aside in the church's calendar for baptisms. We are not baptizing anyone today, but it does remind us our Baptismal Covenant ... specifically two questions that are asked of everyone reaffirming their faith. The two last questions to be asked are: "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" And, "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?"

Our neighbor is not just the person living next door or down the street. Our neighborhood is the entire global village. Our neighbors include people of all colors and cultures, around the corner and on the other side of the world. If we want security in our own lives, then we are

called to work for security for everyone on this planet. If we desire healthy lives then we must be committed to promoting health for others as well. If we want to be acknowledged and loved and respected then we, too, must acknowledge the life of others ... especially the invisible ... and show love for those who feel unloved, and, in the words of the Baptismal Covenant, “respect the dignity of every human being.”

This is nothing more, but nothing less, than taking seriously what Jesus took seriously. On this Sunday after the Epiphany ... the Sunday we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord ... let us remember that Jesus was baptized by John in a river in the wilderness, surrounded by people who were on the outside looking in, who were in need of healing of body, mind and spirit, who were forgotten by the institutions of power.

Jesus' baptismal solidarity with broken people was vividly confirmed by God's affirmation and empowerment. Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision ... the declaration of God the Father that Jesus was his beloved son, and the descent of God the Spirit in the form of a dove. The vision and the voice punctuated the baptismal event. They signaled the meaning, the message and the mission of Jesus as he went public after thirty years of invisibility ... that by the power of the Spirit, the Son of God embodied his Father's unconditional embrace of all people everywhere ... especially the flawed. Now it is for us to take seriously what Jesus took seriously. We, too, are beloved children of God.

Amen.