

Epiphany 1– *the Baptism of our Lord - for St. Aidan's 2024* The Rev Julie H. Smith
 Gen. 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

*“I have baptized you with water;
 but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”*

On this first Sunday following the Epiphany - the 12 days of Christmas ended last night, when you celebrated the Epiphany. And as I understand it this was the culmination of a series of events for the 12 days of Christmas. From what I could see on FaceBook it looks to have been a marvelous series and celebration of the 12 days. A much richer offering than the song on the *“first Day of Christmas my true love gave to me . . .”*

What a way to go St. Aidan's!

On this 1st Sunday in the season of Epiphany we always read one of the gospel passages about the Baptism of our Lord.

It may seem a bit like Déjà vu because we read the first part of the reading on the second Sunday in Advent...

If you noticed . . .

But this passage starts out telling us all about John the Baptist and gives us, as Paul Harvey used to say, “the rest of the story.”

And the rest of the story is that of Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan by John himself. An occurrence that plays on our inquiring minds . . .

Why does Jesus get baptized by John the Baptist, when we are baptized and marked as Christ's own at our baptism. Why does Jesus even need baptism?

The question then is ;

-what does the baptism of Jesus mean?

-And what is significant to us as Christians, Christians whose two most significant sacraments are Baptism and Holy Communion. A baptism both in water and of the Spirit! . . .and Holy Communion being the completion of this first sacrament. Which is why when a person is baptized as a baby or an adult they

may receive Communion from that time forward –no instruction necessary
however instruction is beneficial and offered regularly by the church.

To explore this further let's turn to the theologians.

-Karl Barth refers to Jesus' baptism as a "summary of the essence of the gospel."

This dramatic epiphany of the heavens opening and the Spirit descending as a dove reveals the revelation that God is no longer hidden in the heavens but has become incarnate in the person of Jesus.

As Christians all we need to know about God is now in the person, purpose and grace of Jesus.

-John Chrysostom placed more importance on Jesus baptism than on his birth, stating that "he (Jesus) became manifest to all . . .when he was baptized."

-Emory theology professor Rodney Hunter describes the Jordan River epiphany as a psychological event.

"The conversion or awakening impelled Jesus to respond to John's call to repent and be baptized so that he emerged from the water with a vision of himself as one with God-giving him identity and affirmation." Jesus seeks forgiveness of the sins of the nation Israel -because the kingdom of heaven where the poor are blessed is coming.

It was after this baptismal event that Jesus went into the wilderness, where he experienced a deep spiritual struggle and came out a renewed, "by all appearances with supernatural powers and a revolutionary spiritual message."

But aside from the theologian's perspective I now always think of the Musical – The Voice of One I was fortunate to pay a small part – The Voice of One is about the life of John the Baptist. It was written and produced by the music director Scot Crandal and now retired rector of StJB Robert Briant. Maybe you saw it last fall, it was presented in the sanctuary at St Johns, with some simple sets and

contemporary setting. Both my husband Tom and I were part of the backup singers and cast. The main parts were sung and acted by choir section leaders and local professionals.

My favorite part of the musical was the scene where John the Baptist and Jesus meet up at the river Jordan for the baptism of Jesus. This part is acted out over the Baptismal fountain.

The scene reveals how the introvert John begins to find his own voice, as he gathers disciples around him, and starts to baptize. His cousin Jesus appears in this scene, and we see how similar their messages were.

The song sung by John and Jesus is titled “*The Love You Give.*” It was performed by a baritone and a tenor. . . so, I won’t attempt to sing it for you.

The refrain goes like this, starting with John:

“You wash your hands now wash your heart . . .

Come clean with how you live.

It’s not your DNA that counts, but all the love you give.”

Then Jesus enters and John says; “*And who do we have here you are the one who should be baptizing me . . .*”

Jesus then sings they overlap for a few lines and the song ends with Jesus (*splashing water on each other*)

You wash your hands now wash your heart . . .

Come clean with how you live...

It’s not your DNA that counts, but all the love you give.

... but all the love you give.

It was a powerful portion of the musical and of course you had to be there to fully appreciate it. As I imagined the original story was back in Jerusalem.

However, we interpret or view the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, I believe the most transformative part of this story are the words spoken by God:

“You are my beloved (son) in who I am well pleased.”

Words we all want to hear. The most coveted words in all human languages. We would be deceiving ourselves if we denied our longing to hear that we have been pleasing to God or anyone else significant in our lives.

These are words of affirmation of acceptance and approval from a parent to a child. Even though this epiphany story establishes Jesus as the Son of God, it also clearly establishes our identity as God's adoptive sons and daughters.

And when we need this affirmation the most is when we feel that we may be unworthy. That is the good news, we are worthy of God's promise of unconditional love. "The love you give."

This is the essence of our faith that is defined well by one of my favorite theologians Paul Tillich –faith is "*the courage to accept acceptance.*"

-what does the baptism of Jesus mean?

- what is significant to us as Christians?

--A man dropped by my office at the hospital where I served as supervisor and head chaplain of Spiritual Care for almost 10 years. It was in the first few months I was there. He had a question . . . he wanted to know about whether he would see his wife in heaven when he died, then he told me that the former chaplain baptized him –around the time of her death. "why did he do that?" he asked me.

I must be careful not to project my beliefs on others in that role as a chaplain in a secular setting.... The former chaplain I succeeded was what I'd call old school and an Evangelical with strong Christian beliefs about salvation. The kind of thing a professional chaplain puts aside to support others whose beliefs may be different than our own. When I asked this man if he wanted to be baptized, he was not so certain about it. When I asked if he was engaged with a church, he reported he was not. But he was still pondering the theological question-- if he would see his wife again after death.

I was sad that I didn't think this man's query had been properly addressed. And it had been over a year since his wife's death, he was still wrestling with this, his soul was distressed, and he was not part of a faith community to support and love him.

This is one of the reasons we baptize within a community of faith to support one another in our journey. To have support in our struggles of faith and to strive to be the kingdom of heaven on earth to each other.

Baptism on behalf of the nation is how Jesus begins his journey; and it is how *we* begin our journey. That is why we have the baptismal font which is often located at the entrance of the church. . .

And as we begin our journey as Christians through baptism, we do this in cooperative spirit and as a part of a community of faith.

As we move on into this new year in the season of Epiphany, the season of Christ's manifestation, let us renew our baptism with a renewed commitment, a renewed commitment to each other in faith, a faith that will sustain us through the issues and challenges of life and to deepen our connections with God through each other and through serving others.

As we renew the baptismal promises this morning let's take time for reflection between them.... to listen and to hear how God's Spirit is working in us today.... listening and reflecting on God's love, freely given.

Baptism is what shapes us as a community; we are beloved ones of God's favor, well pleased by God,

Jesus' baptism affirms him, God's creation as the Devine embodied.

The voice of the one crying in the wilderness, the voice who identifies the one who is more powerful, the voice of God identifying this beloved son.

The premise of the musical *The Voice of One* is the voice of each and every one of us finding the power of our own voices using that power for good. Today when we reaffirm our Baptismal vows we will use our voices to continue in the teaching and fellowship, seeking Christ in ALL persons, striving for justice and peace.

*"It's not your DNA that counts,
but all the love you give!"*

Amen