Sermon on Baptism

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Sermon

Epiphany 1B January 7, 2024

Mark 1:4-11

Today is the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord.  We always commemorate Christ’s baptism on the First Sunday after the Epiphany because this is part of the season of manifestation and revelation.

First, what do we know about Jesus?  This is not a rhetorical question, so feel free to name some characteristics.  He is the Son of God.  He is the Second Person of the Trinity.  He was fully human and fully divine.  He was without sin.  Other named characteristics . . .

Second, what is the purpose of baptism?  It’s the sacrament of adoption into Christ’s Body.  It washes/cleanses us from sin.  It offers new life in the Holy Spirit.

So . . . if we believe Jesus was without sin, and if we believe baptism cleanses us from sin, why did Jesus get baptized?  There has been a lot of discussion about this very thing over the centuries.  One popular heresy put forth the idea that Jesus only became part of the Godhead at his baptism (this is the heresy of adoptionism).  Orthodox Christianity refutes that, holding to the belief that Christ was, is, and ever shall be part of the Godhead.  So again, why the need for baptism?

I don’t claim to know all the reasons, but there are two in particular that I find especially compelling.  The first is as an example.  We’ve all heard the saying from people in leadership positions that goes something like, “I wouldn’t ask you to do anything I wouldn’t do myself.”

As followers of Christ, we look to him to set examples for how we are to live.  From seeing that people are fed and cared for to treating outsiders and foreigners as equals, to treating women with dignity, to not blaming victims for their mistreatment, to praying and worshiping regularly, Jesus is our example.  This includes baptism.  We are baptized because Christ was baptized.

The second reason has to do with water.  In today’s gospel Jesus sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove.  In Matthew it says the heavens were opened.  Opened or torn apart, the last time the bible records something like this happening is in Genesis 7 when the heavens were opened and the earth was flooded.

In that Genesis story God saw all the evil that humans did and he was sorry he created them.  His solution was to open the heavens to flood the earth and kill every living thing – every animal, every man, woman, and child, while only saving eight people and a limited number of animals.  In that story water was a destructive force.

But that story is also a prefiguring of baptism.  In baptism we are submerged in water (sometimes literally, sometimes symbolically), symbolizing the death of our old sinful selves.  We are then sealed by the power of the Holy Spirit, remembering the descent of the Spirit on Jesus, and we are raised to new life in Christ, just as Noah and his family began their new lives after the flood.

After the flood, God put his bow in the sky as a sign and covenant that he would never do that again.

Christ’s baptism goes a bit further.  When he was baptized, he sanctified the waters so that we are blessed by the same water that anointed Christ.  And unlike in Genesis when the heavens were opened to rain down destruction, the baptism of Christ opened the heavens to rain down life.  In Christ and through his baptism, we have been given living water.

In the baptism of Christ we have at least two examples of why the Baptism of Christ was necessary:  as an example for us to follow, and as the act that moved water from a force of God’s destruction to a force of sanctifying life with God.

Let us then follow Christ’s baptismal example.  Let us continue in fellowship and prayer.  Let us continue to resist evil.  Let us proclaim the Good News.  Let us serve people as Christ served them.  Let us work to respect the dignity of every human being.

Let us also remember that through baptism the waters of destruction have been forever changed to become waters of life.

With that in mind, let us now renew our own baptismal covenant.