

January 10, 2020
The First Sunday after the Epiphany
The Rev. Paula Jefferson

I Will, With God's Help.

During the 1960s and 70s, every summer my parents packed the car with kids and suitcases. They drove from northern Pennsylvania to St. Petersburg Florida. During the early years, much of that drive was on 2 or 3-lane roads. Each year, we would encounter new stretches of 4-lane highways.

The year that Baltimore added a ring road around the city lives on in our family lore. Our trip required us to navigate the Baltimore circle...but it was so new, the department of transportation had not yet installed many signs. Exits weren't numbered. Highway routes weren't marked.

My dad was not the sort who enjoyed stopping for directions. But, after he realized we had traveled the circle one full circuit and not exited, he stopped at the next exit to ask for help.

A kindly service station attendant gave him some landmarks that he would see before the exit that would take us south. Dad got back on the road and drove until he saw what he thought were the right landmarks. He exited the freeway....and discovered he had arrived at the very same garage where he had gotten directions.

According to family legend, we circled Baltimore 4 times before finding the road that would point us toward our destination.

World of the Text:

On this first Sunday after the Epiphany, we commemorate the Baptism of Jesus.

Epiphany is a Greek word meaning manifestation...revelation. During the weeks following Epiphany, our lectionary presents us with many Divine *signs* through which God reveals God's self. The baptism of Jesus is a foundational *sign*.

The text tells us that **Jesus “came from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan”**. By this time in life, Jesus would be about 30 years old. In his era, he would be considered middle-aged. He is the head of his family--Joseph having died at an earlier time. He’s a laborer; some scholars believe he was a wood-worker or builder.

Jesus presents himself to John, to be immersed in water. In Episcopal parishes, baptism by immersion is not common. But, as a 14-year-old Baptist, I vividly recall stepping into a baptismal pool and wading into the deeper end where the pastor was waiting. I crossed my arms over my chest, pinched my nose, and *yielded control* of my body.

It was humbling to present myself for baptism as a teenager. And, of course, I had all that teenager angst about how my hair would ever get dry in time for the reception.

But, Jesus is not a teenager with teenager concerns. He is an adult, and he is *without sin*. Yet, he comes to this river *purposefully*. He will yield control of his physical body to John.

And just as he was coming up out of the water, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Trinity is present. *His* baptismal reception is a Divine, private proclamation of Jesus’ participation in the Trinity. Private because the text tells us that only Jesus sees the dove and hears the voice of God. Proclamation because Mark reveals this scene to us, those who hear the Word.

World in front of the Text:

Why does Jesus come to this muddy river? What is God revealing to us about God’s self?

First, Baptism itself is a sign—it points toward new life through Jesus Christ. In Baptism we are made new, claimed as God’s own, and initiated into the Body of Christ—the Church Universal.

Second, in the creation story of Genesis, God invites humans to participate in the stewardship of God’s Creation. And, here, in the Jordan River, Jesus invites a human to participate in his Baptism.

God points us toward collaborative participation in God's life. This journey of Christianity is not meant to be lived in isolation. Perhaps this is the yearning all of us feel to gather again, here, in the Sanctuary.

In the Episcopal Sacrament of Baptism, we often baptize babies and infants. These little people are blissfully unaware of what is happening ... until someone pours water over their heads. This is not the bath time of an infant's choice. Rather it is we, the Church, who are choosing. We are choosing to re-affirm our own baptismal vows, and we are vowing to participate in each new Christian's walk of faith. Our sacrament is a *sign*...it points toward God's covenantal relationship... partnership...with the us through the Church.

And these baptismal vows are not for faint of heart. In a few minutes, each of us will be asked to renew our baptismal vows. In light of the domestic terrorism in Washington DC last week, maybe we should reflect on these vows. What is it we are committing to do? And what makes this so difficult?

Our nation is not comprised of like-minded people. We have never been a nation of like-minded people. We do not all look alike. We have never all looked alike. We do not all speak the same language. We have never all spoken the same language. We don't all share the same values. We have never all shared the same values. We do not all know God by the same name. We have never all known God by the same name.

On Wednesday night, I watched news reported on two stations: one agency sympathetic to conservative viewers and one agency sympathetic to progressive viewers. Both news agencies were angry with the violence in Washington. Yet both agencies read the violence differently *and* passionately. How can these interpretations be so different? Is one "right" and the other "wrong"? Are both right? Are both wrong?

In our Human Flourishing Adult Education class, we will soon begin reading "*Not in God's Name*". This book is written by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. He is interested in understanding why people commit religious violence. But, his analysis will help us understand why racism-- and the violence we witnessed last week--exist in human culture...*our* culture. The point, of course, is to ask, "Where do we go from here?" Or, as Christians, how do we live more fully into our baptismal vows?

Jesus did not go to the muddy waters of the Jordan River to be washed clean and made perfect. He already is. He went to the water of his own creation, fully divine, fully human. In that muddy water, John, Jesus, and God reveal the seeds of renewed collaboration between human-kind and God.

And that collaboration is apparent in our Baptismal vows: We do not profess or vow to respect the dignity of every human being *alone*. We do not vow to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself, *alone*. We profess that we will, *with God's help*.

The waters of our time are troubled. God invites us to come to the water, with humble hearts....to wade into the water, repent, and renew our walk with God....to see Christ in every person—the folks who vote like us and the folks who don't. So long as our lives are cut off from the diversity of God's Creation, we are clothed in spiritual girdles.

Loving the neighbors who look, talk, and think like us is the easy stuff, but it doesn't take us anywhere. When we engage only with people who are like us, we're just circling Baltimore. We aren't really listening, or watching, for the Divine signs that point us toward flourishing in the fullness of God's life.

- Holy God,
creator of light and herald of goodness,
at the waters of his baptism
you proclaimed Jesus your beloved Son.
With the baptized of every time and generation,
may we say yes to your call to repentance
and be led to the life of abundance we experience
in your kinship and your love. Amen. *Cite: Vanderbilt Divinity Lectionary*