

First Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Christians all over the world recognize some kind of baptism. Pentecostals in the American South dress adults in white to walk into muddy rivers while preachers give fiery sermons. Orthodox priests in the eastern part of the church dunk screaming, naked newborns into huge stone fonts during liturgies that take hours. And in our own tradition, we offer a dignified sprinkle of water on the forehead after the prayers and before the oil. The specifics differ wildly, but the core elements are always the same: a candidate, a minister, an invocation of the Holy Spirit, and water.

My own family was a bit split when it came to the specifics of baptism. Some of those in my extended family were baby sprinklers, and some of those in my extended family were adult dunkers. So, my parents, likely to keep peace among opinionated relatives, had us baptized when we were a little older. I'm a bit lucky that way, I suppose. I actually remember being baptized. I was nine years old. The pastor came over to have dinner at our house to get me prepared for the rite. He asked me some questions that I don't remember. But I do remember telling him that my favorite service of the year was the candlelight service at Christmas Eve, and before you knew it, I was scheduled to get baptized on that holy night. My family has joked ever since that I sometimes get myself confused with Jesus since we both share an important anniversary at Christmas.

I remember standing there, in my new green sweater, kind of nervous. My brother was my godfather, and I still have the candle they gave me in a box somewhere. I remember the dark, cold night, and I remember the smell of candles and the feel of the warm water on my forehead. It was still and beautiful, and I'm really grateful for my family, that pastor, and that congregation for helping to raise me in the Christian faith, just like they promised to do that night.

The Church commemorates the baptism of Christ on the first Sunday after Epiphany every year, and so we read the story about John and Jesus and the followers and that curious dove. I'm sure you've heard countless sermons on Baptism over the years, so I doubt that this one will cover any new ground. But in a way that's the point; Jesus and the disciples understood the initiation rite of the followers of Jesus to be something incredibly ordinary. They borrowed the idea of a ritual bath from their Jewish brothers and sisters, but then they made it even simpler. They decided that the followers of Jesus didn't need temples, or special clothes, or magic words, or costly sacrifices. Initiation could happen anywhere that the people of God gathered near the water. These earliest Christians believed, and we still believe, that God can transform the humblest elements into someone extraordinary — water, oil, bread, wine.

There are places in scripture where we can see that the Jerusalem Temple had a tendency to get corrupted. Priests would start to sell access to God to the highest bidder. Those who could afford the costliest sacrifices at the altar would then have the most access to divine favor. The princes of the city would sacrifice bulls and goats to God--a feat that could never be matched financially by the poor. And then, in contrast, John the Baptist and his scruffy pilgrims on the outskirts of the city preach that God is present in water — free, ubiquitous, wild water. Baptism is a critique of a Temple that had forgotten the outsiders. Baptism is a political act of solidarity with the marginalized. Baptism is a promise that membership in the family of God is free and available to all who seek it regardless of lineage, station, or political affiliation.

The Gospel writers and St. Paul tell stories of faithful people being baptized as the message of the Gospel spreads in the ancient world. The church fathers write libraries worth of books on the nature of Baptism. Listen to what Tertullian, one of the earliest Christian writers, has to say about baptism:

... So that from the very fact, that with so great simplicity, without pomp, without any considerable novelty of preparation, finally, without expense, a man is dipped in water, and amid the utterance of some few words, is sprinkled, and then rises again, not much (or not at all) the cleaner, the consequent attainment of eternity is esteemed the more incredible.

And that is the great trick of baptism. In it we get a sense of how God's economy works--in a rite that is free and available to everyone, we receive the costliest gift--admittance into the fellowship and fidelity of the family of Christ, and a constant reminder of the love that God has for each of us even when we are sometimes unlovable. The miracle is that the simplest drop of water contains in it the mightiest reminder of God's glory living inside us.

If you look around up here, you will see a lot of people wearing white. The acolytes. The chalice bearer. The entire choir. The organist. The deacon. Even me, underneath these fancy priest clothes. They are wearing white to let you know that they are qualified to serve God in these particular ways. Not because they are perfect or smart, or beautiful, or interesting--though assuredly they are all those things. They wear white to remind us that they are, first and always, baptized children of God and that all the authority and power that they exercise in these roles in the church come from their initiation into the family of God. It's tempting to think they wear white because it looks pretty, but that's just a fringe benefit. We wear white because we have been welcomed, seen, healed, and made into new people through the Holy Spirit. We wear white because we have been entranced into the family of Christ with all our brothers and sisters around the world--even if we were baptized in a river, in a stone font, or in a church on Christmas Eve. God made the water holy. God made us into one family. God loved the least, the lost, you, and me. Remember your baptism. Amen.