

Epiphany 1B 2015 Homily

Feast of the Baptism of Jesus

January 11, 2015

Mark 1:7-11

John the baptizer proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

It has been over two weeks since Christmas, and it is likely that the new toys children received on Christmas Day have lost some of their luster. What was new and exciting when the gift was opened, what *consumed* a child's attention and energy on Christmas Day, has already become familiar. Before long, the toy is apt to be forgotten, consigned to the toy box or the closet. We have seen it happen, over and over. It was the same when we were children.

And it is important to recognize that as *adults* we are **equally** susceptible to this phenomenon, for we are likewise captivated by what is new.

This past week the annual Consumer Electronics Show was held in Las Vegas. This year's new inventions included a musical light bulb and various smart watches, smart home control systems, and smart bathroom scales (I kid you not). Although many of the inventions have minimal *practical* use, they are **new** and **novel** – and that is enough to draw our attention.

Those of us not so interested in technology are no *less* enamored with the new, however. We watch the evening news to find out what's new in the world, or read the local newspaper to discover what's new in our own community. That news then becomes the topic of our daily conversation. "Wasn't it tragic," we comment to our barber or hairdresser, "about that Florida man who killed his 5-year-old daughter by throwing her off a bridge?" It is *also* tragic that a child dies of hunger somewhere in the world each time we take a breath; but that isn't *new*, so it doesn't command our attention.

We are great to respond when something is new; *not* so great on the follow-up. When was the last time you or I thought to bring food to church for Loaves and Fishes?

Today we observe one of the Church's four major baptismal Feast Days: the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus. Now a baptism is a wonderful and joyous event! After the soaring prayers from the Prayer Book and solemn promises by the adult candidate or the sponsors of a child, water is poured, and the sign of the cross is traced with oil upon the forehead. "You are sealed with the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever!" A chill goes up our spine as the holiness of the occasion washes over *us*, also.

But then the baptism is over, and we forget about it. Parents or grandparents who brought their child or grandchild to church to be baptized soon forget the vows they have taken. Some stop coming to church at all, and live and act the way they have always lived and acted, as if the

baptism had never happened. Those of us who have *continued* to come to church are no **less** guilty: do *we* live according to the vows taken at our baptism? Do we even remember them?

Like a child opening a new toy on Christmas, we thrill to that fresh promise wrapped up in a baptism; and yet, as one preacher has said, “Baptisms, like all beginnings, find their *meaning* **after** the event... Beginning is usually easy. Finishing is usually hard...”

“...On their wedding day almost every couple is *capable* of creating a life together filled with faith, hope and joy – **and** almost every couple is capable of creating something worse than their worst nightmare... Marriages can’t be judged on the wedding day”*; they are rather judged by what happens day-in, day-out, year after year, decade after decade as the couple struggles to build a lasting and loving relationship.

Beginning is usually easy. Finishing is usually hard.

The joy of a mother and father overflows as they behold their new-born child in the delivery-room; but it is the 18 years *following* that birth which prove what kind of parent that mother or father is.

“It doesn’t take as much to *decide* to be a friend as it takes to **be** a *good* friend. The moments of initiation take on meaning when we are true to the promise of that beginning.” (*ibid.*) Holy Baptism, the Church’s rite of initiation, takes on meaning when we are true to its gift and its promises.

And what are those promises?

A good place to start is with those words from our Prayer Book which we pledge at baptism, Confirmation, and each time we renew our baptismal vows (which, in our church, is at *least* 4 times a year):

I promise to continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. In short, I promise to fully participate in the life, learning, and mission of the church community, the Body of Christ.

I promise to persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever I fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord. We all know our own principal sins and temptations: perhaps ours is anger, sarcasm, deceit, being judgmental, gossip, failing to do those good things we know we should do. In taking or renewing baptismal vows, we promise to repent of these, and return to our Lord and *his* ways.

I will proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. How many of us talk with others outside the church about our faith? We solemnly promise, in our baptismal vows, to do so. And if someone heard our words and watched our actions day in and day out – our example – would they see Christ and want to follow him, want to join our church -- or would they think less of our Lord and his Church?

I will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving my neighbor as myself. Can I see Christ in those annoying children next door? In that person who hurt me so deeply? In that Muslim or Hindu whose customs are so strange? And can I *serve* the Christ in them?

I will strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. Do I even *desire* justice and peace – or, down deep, do I want vengeance and reprisal? And when I see someone whose *actions* I cannot condone, can I still respect his or her dignity as a human being, a child of God?

These are our baptismal vows.

But Holy Baptism is not only – or even principally – about **our** promises. Holy Baptism is our primary Sacrament, and as such it is *itself* promise, it is itself *gift*: a gift of grace and empowerment. Grace and power to die with Christ to our old sinful selves, and grace and power to be resurrected with him into a risen life like his. Grace and power to become community, for the Sacrament is not something which happens **only** for the sake of the baptized individual: it is initiation and incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church.

The question for us today is: “Have I lived up to the promise, and the promises, of my baptism? Having received that Sacrament, that gift, have I **used** its grace and empowerment in my daily life? Have I been faithful to the vows I once took and have so regularly renewed, doing so again today? Am I a different person because of my baptism than I would have been had I *not* been baptized; or do I live in the same manner as every other reasonably good person in America lives? As a member of the Church, do I give of myself to the health and growth of the church community? Or do I take nourishment *from* it, while not giving anything *back*?

Does my baptism **live** in me, or is it filed away in the closet along with my baptismal certificate?

Bobby Knight, the famous college basketball coach, was once asked about a player who was doing a great job coming off the bench. “When will he get to start?” the questioner asked. The coach responded, “You don’t understand the game. It doesn’t matter who starts. It matters who finishes.”

Baptism is the *beginning* of a journey, and beginning is usually easy. Finishing is usually hard. In Baptism, we’re given a wonderful gift and handed a map, but *we* have to use that gift; we have to take the trip. Today we re-examine that map, and assess where we have taken the right turns, where we have gone down the wrong roads, where we have gotten stuck and haven’t moved. And if we are true to its promise, we will not put that map away in the closet; but will use it to guide us each day, the rest of our lives. For though the *act* of Baptism is once-and-for-all, its call and its promise are new every morning.

AMEN

*Brett Younger, Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, TX, taken from *Lectionary Homiletics*, Jan. 2006 edition of “The Sermon Mall”