

First Sunday after Epiphany January 13

Readings: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 89:20-29; Acts 10:34-38; Matthew 3:13-17

All four Gospels tell a story of Jesus being baptized in the river Jordan. Folks back in the day would catch on immediately. Jews were baptized in a pool. It was a cleansing ritual. So you touched a leper, or moved through a menstrual cycle or any of the myriad fouls listed, well, ease on down to the pool. Pay the pool priest and get normalcy reinstated.

What? Jesus, a Jew, being baptized not in a pool but in a river, and not just any river. Baptized in the Jordan. They would know and we also know: the children of Israel go from bondage to new life as they pass through the river Jordan.

This baptism does not bring about a cleansing status quo. This baptism is the way from a bondage to ritualism; bondage from the priestly cult, toward participating in a new creation, a new creation Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

Our Gospel writers are saying in another way the good news. The relationship with God is not about ritual purity, sacrificing animals or paying the temple taxes. This new baptism will be by the Holy Spirit. Oh my goodness! We can say again, the Holy Spirit creates new life. Here it is now...the Holy Spirit fires us up!

The new relationship with God invites us to be with folks who consciously create the Kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit invites us to be the living presence of God. What we call church began as this gathering of people.

Just like us here today, this was not a gathering of like-minded people, not a gathering of social or political equals, not a gathering for the seekers of normalcy.

Rather, the one thing we have in common with our ancestors and with each other is this --- in a particular, perhaps peculiar, yet always clear way, we have been touched by the Holy Spirit.

We are not here because Mom would like it.

We are here because all of us are seekers for the meaning of life. We have, as the song says, "looked for love in all the wrong places, looked for love in all the wrong faces".

Somewhere we heard something about the God of love and compassion, forgiveness and justice. Our ancestors were like that, too. They, like us, could picture this compassion and grace and justice. As Martin Luther King said, "We can see the long, slow arm of God in the actions of men".

Jesus for us and for them is the word made flesh. Our God is not a mystery. Our God is seen in the reality of Jesus.

So the discussion went like this: the pastor told me that if I believed in Jesus, all would be well. "I'm sure of one thing", said I. "When we follow the way Jesus lived, when we practice compassion and justice, we are nourished by the creative force, but in many ways, all may not be well."

I saw the young man in Books-A-Million. I was a youth minister when he was a kid. I helped his parents understand addiction and how the boy wanted to stay high and die. They cried. We pondered. Some go through the Jordan, some don't. As I talked with him, it was good to hear about his passing through the Jordan. His entire demeanor was screaming new life.

All of us in this room have gone through the Jordan many times. We know what lies ahead on the other side is not the Garden of Eden. On the other side, we learn how to be sheep and shepherds. On the other side of the Jordan, the children of Israel had a lot of work ahead of them. Jerusalem was not rebuilt in a day.

Our new creations, our ability to live into our baptismal covenant will not happen easily either. That's why we are here. For us, following compassion and justice is the way and the truth and the life. We come here to be with others who are also followers. We come here for nourishment.

It may have been somewhat of a mystery about how all this happens, but there is no mystery about the nature of God we see in Jesus.

As we say our Baptismal Covenant, it is radically clear about what's ahead of us as we are baptized in the Jordan. The song says "the river Jordan is chilly and cold". Yet our continuing journey will bring us to and through all sorts of barriers, rivers, problems, disappointments and subtle jungles we could never prepare for.

Remember our fight song: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.

The living presence of new life dies. The living presence of new life lives on, transformed. And the living presence of new life will always be on the way.

Here we are a group of rag tag followers of Jesus. What we have in common is a reality we have difficulty expressing and yet the Spirit blows in us all. Brings us here like the prodigal coming home. Sends us out just like the prodigal's father put him back to work in the vineyard. This is the way.

In Christ's name, amen.

Rev. Will Hinson

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