

The Baptism of Our Lord – January 8, 2017
Text: Matthew 3:13-17
Theme: The Beginning of the Journey

We are now in the season of the Church Year called “Epiphany.” The Epiphany season is a journey because the word “epiphany” means “to make manifest” or “to appear,” in that as we journey on, things take shape and become clearer. Depending on whether we are in lectionary series a, b, or c, we will see different aspects of Jesus being made manifest to us. The goal for us, during this season, is to walk along with Jesus and his disciples as they journey together. As they grew in their understanding of him, so too do we grow in our understanding of who Jesus is until the last day of the Epiphany season which is always Transfiguration where he reveals himself for the first time in all his glory, appearing blindingly white and talking with Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop.

On this day, the day of the Baptism of Our Lord, about 2,000 years ago, we are at a point where there are no disciples. Up until this day of his baptism, Jesus was just a carpenter from Nazareth, raised by Mary and Joseph. There are probably some family stories floating around about him – angels singing at his birth, Magi from the East visiting him a couple years later and bringing him gifts that paid for a quick escape to Egypt during the slaughter of the

innocents, the whole thing about his sitting with the Rabbis at the temple when he was 12. But so far, all in all, he was just a guy.

Jesus went out to where John was Baptizing in the Jordan River. There were many other people going out there as well and he was just one of the crowd. Now John's baptism was not like our baptism. It was a common practice to be baptized as a sign of repentance. The symbolism was the washing of the outer body to mark the forgiveness and cleansing of the inner body. The Holy Spirit had not yet come. Baptism was a pious practice but not a Sacrament.

John rightly questioned him. John was Jesus' cousin so he knew the stories of who he was supposed to be and what he was supposed to do. According to what Joseph and Mary had been told, this Jesus was the very son of God who would save the world from their sins. So John, who is baptizing as a sign for people who were truly repentant of their sins, does not understand what sins the son of God could have of which to repent. And that is the whole point of Jesus' Baptism.

Jesus elevates Baptism from being a sign or a symbol in a pious practice to being a sacrament. Jesus went into the water when it was his turn but something quite remarkable happened that Matthew records for us in the Gospel for today.

“And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’”

That had never happened before. For the first time, the carpenter from Nazareth was revealed to be something more than anyone expected. “This is my beloved Son?” What did that mean? Of course no one at the time understood what that meant, but then neither do we. We all hear the words. We understand the language. But it takes many years for us to come to any understanding at all. When I was 9 years old, I could confess the words. Jesus is the Son of God given to die on the cross for my salvation. But I did not fully appreciate the depth of my sin, so I didn’t really understand the need for salvation or what my Baptism had done for me. I also did not have any understanding of what it would be like to sacrifice one’s own son for the sake of another. So salvation, for me at 9, was equivalent to summer vacation and Thanksgiving dinner wrapped into one. It was good and that’s all I knew.

As we grow and mature, hearing the message over and over again, we slowly begin to grasp the enormity of the words people heard the day Jesus was Baptized and then, we begin to grasp the

enormity of our own Baptisms. He was not Baptized for himself. He was the sinless Son of God. He was carrying our sins on that day. He carried our sins into that river and drown our Old Adams, our sinful natures. He produced a cure for original sin – Baptism.

When you were Baptized, God claimed you as his own son or daughter. You began your journey of life even as Jesus began his ministry on earth. God sent his Holy Spirit to dwell in you until the day comes that we will all dwell together in paradise and our journeys will be completed. We were marked on the day of our Baptism, singled out, set aside, made holy for a holy purpose just as was done to our Lord. He was set aside that day to die on the cross and suffer hell in our place. We were set aside to be adopted as his brothers and sisters and to inherit all the riches of the family. Until that day comes, our challenge is to watch and see what he will reveal to us about our journey through his journey.

That is what Epiphany is all about. We watch and learn. From the coming of the wise men, to our Lord's Baptism, to the calling of the first disciples we watch and learn. The miracles of healing and the amazing teachings on who we are as children of God, as salt and light in the world; this we watch and learn. Finally we will watch and learn as Christ reverses the curse of the Law and shines forth in all his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration.