

Year B, Epiphany 1
Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

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January 11, 2015

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer. *Amen.*

Every year on the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we hear the story of our Lord's baptism, and so this Sunday is considered a feast day and named "The Baptism of our Lord." This year we hear Mark's version from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the primary translation used for readings during worship in the Episcopal Church. Although *The Message* translation by Eugene Peterson is not included on the "approved" list, I find its contemporary language offers fresh insights to familiar scriptures. If you follow along in your bulletin as I read today's Gospel lesson from *The Message*, you'll see the differences.

"John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.

"As he preached he said, 'The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom, I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out.'"

"At this time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: 'You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.'"

Note the use of the word "change:" four times in these seven verses. First there is John's "baptism of life-change that leads to the forgiveness of sins." Next, "as people confessed their sins, they were baptized...into a changed life." And then John says "The star in this drama will change your life," ... "will change you from the inside out."

Baptism is one of two major sacraments celebrated in our church, the other being Holy Eucharist. We call these "major" sacraments because Jesus initiated them. Some denominations call them ordinances for that same reason, because their practice was ordained by Christ.

The sacraments, as you'll remember, are "outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace." In baptism, the outward sign is obvious—it's water; yet the inward and spiritual grace is not so obvious. It is achieved through that very word *The Message* uses so freely—"change"—a word of movement and action, a word that indicates something will be different going forward. In baptism, and in the case of all of the sacraments, we believe the differences that occur through the changes the sacraments evoke in us will be good and beneficial.

Today is one of those days deemed by the church to be particularly appropriate for baptisms, and when there is no baptism, for the renewal of baptismal vows. We do this five times every year, often enough that it can become routine over the course of our lifetime. Unfortunately, its regular repetition makes it easy for us to respond without having to ponder over the words by which we renew our commitment to Jesus Christ. Renew is also a word of action. When I typed it into the Thesaurus of my computer, it brought up a long list of words, including: reintroduce; recommence; return to; renovate; repair; restore; replenish. To renew something indicates action based on

thoughtful intention. And so it is with thoughtful intention that we are called to answer the questions asked in the renewal of our vows:

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

These are not idle questions, but questions that seek commitment from us and call us to action. Our responsibility in answering them is for ourselves only. We don't say "***we*** will." We say "***I*** will. As members of the Church, we are very comfortable, perhaps too comfortable, with "we" language. It's so easy to say, "as Episcopalians, we believe this" or "at St. Francis, we do such and so." But the questions we'll answer today don't include a single word about the Church, or even about the Body of Christ except to express our belief in it. When we answer those questions and renew our baptismal vows, we are standing out on a limb all by ourselves—except, that is, for God's help. We answer by saying, "I will, with God's help."

God's help doesn't mean that God is going to do all the work. Our affirmative responses to the questions asked of us indicate that we are the ones who will take the necessary action to partner with God; that we will *strive* to change our lives and rely on God to equip us to change and to stay connected to God in whatever circumstances life throws at us. Certainly Jesus' life is our model for that, beginning with his own baptism, which is recounted in each of the four Gospels. Through Matthew, Mark and Luke, we learn that after his baptism Jesus spent time in the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan and protected by angels. Filled by the Holy Spirit at his baptism, he was changed, renewed and replenished, so that he could withstand those forty days, and the days that followed them.

I've heard stories from adults who, after their own baptisms, have been faced with significant challenges and believed those difficulties were meant to test them just as intentionally as Jesus was tested in the wilderness. Is that what really happened? Were they tested intentionally? I don't know. But I do know that is *not* the experience of everyone who is baptized. Whether it's our own baptism or the vows we make on behalf of our children and godchildren, sometimes we approach baptism as a mere rite of passage, a milestone we have passed or a checkmark on the list of our life's transitional events.

In a meditation about this passage, Deb Meisch writes about the baptism of two infants, one pre-adolescent girl and one young man in the church she attends. As in our own church, the young children in the congregation were invited to come closer to watch and the adults participated with the renewal of their own vows and promised to help the new Christians keep their new vows. There was little resemblance to our Lord's Baptism: no splashing around in the waters of the river, no parting of the ceiling of the church, no dove descending to deliver God's message of pleasure and love, although those things had been remembered through the Gospel lesson. The babies didn't cry, the girl and the young man didn't appear to be different, didn't look new and improved. And so, Ms. Meisch wonders, "then what?" "Are these four people really changed? Will their lives be any different now that their foreheads have been washed at the font? How will we know?" Perhaps these are appropriate questions for us to ask ourselves as we renew our own baptismal covenant.

Grant, O Lord, that we who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant we have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior. *Amen.*