



“One Day”

Text: Mark 1:4-11

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

Baptism of the Lord - January 14, 2024

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Today is the second Sunday of the New Year. It seems appropriate that the Baptism of Our Lord should be on our church calendar as the new year begins, because both of these things are about beginnings. Baptism is about beginning. Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan began his public ministry, and our baptisms represent our new life in Christ. And the new year is also the opportunity for new beginnings. It is the reason so many people make new year’s resolutions, because we see it as a new beginning, a chance to make some needed changes in our life.

So today I want us to think about new beginnings as we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord. And what better way can there be than to begin a new year by remembering our baptisms?

A few years back, the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Elizabeth Eaton, wrote an article about this very thing, with the title: *Baptism Begins a Real New Year*. And in this article, she reflected first on why we make New Year’s resolutions.

“We sense that our lives are not entirely the way they should be. So we try to fill that gap ourselves. And so, we make our New Year’s resolutions. And these resolutions might very well be worthy goals and they might actually be beneficial, but they can’t fill the gap between who we are and who we know we should be.”

These resolutions, in other words, can’t save us. But they don’t have to save us. Because we are saved through our baptisms into Christ.

“In baptism,” Bishop Eaton writes, “we have died the only death that really matters. The death of Christ Jesus into which we are buried is the end of death. The death of Christ Jesus into which we are buried is the end of death. It is the breaking of the power of sin. It is the beginning of our new life.”

And so she concludes her article by encouraging us to: “Make New Year’s resolutions if you want, but understand that in baptism God has given us a new life, a new year, a new day. Freed from all of the emotional and spiritual energy that has been invested in the impossible task of freeing ourselves, we are now free to love God and serve the neighbor.”

And I think that these are very wise words to hear at the beginning of a new year. And they bring us back to the gift of our baptisms into Christ. Our baptisms free us from trying to free ourselves. Our baptisms save us from trying to save ourselves. Our baptisms give us a new beginning that is rooted in Christ, and rooted in grace, not in the need to have a perfect year, or to accomplish every resolution. We are freed from all of that. And so, freed from all of that, we can get back to doing what God wants us to do this year, things like: loving God, serving our neighbor, sharing our faith, and striving for justice and peace in our world.

And how does this all fit into our narrative for today? Because, at the heart of our reading, it is a story about new beginnings and we know that Jesus’ baptism is his new beginning, the beginning of his public ministry. This is the critical moment when we go from knowing very little about Jesus’ life before to his life after - his new life of ministry, of service to God.

So here is the tie-in between Jesus’ baptism and ours. First, Jesus was baptized for us. He teaches us about baptism through his baptism. In this story, when Jesus is baptized by John in the River Jordan, there are three significant things that take place, and each of these has something to teach us about his baptism and ours.

Heaven is opened. This is the first thing that takes place when Jesus is baptized. The heavens are torn apart. Or, in other translations, the heavens are opened. When Jesus was baptized he saw heaven being opened. And when Jesus died on the cross, he opened heaven for all of us.

Baptism opens heaven for us. And because it does, baptism gives hope and takes away the fear of death. And that changes everything, doesn’t it?

We live in a world that seems driven by fear, and fear of death is right up there with so many other fears we have right now. Fear of dying by gun violence is now such a reality that security has become a major topic of discussion for church leaders. Add to that the prevalence of cancer and other life threatening diseases, we can’t seem to get away from thoughts of death. Yet, we should not be driven by fear, but by faith. We have our children baptized and we do that because we trust in the promise of our baptism. We know that we have already died the only death that really matters. We believe that we are living a new life in Christ. And because of that, we are not afraid. And this should change how we live - every day, and in every way.

The second thing that takes place when Jesus is baptized is that the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove. John the Baptist had already reminded those gathered around that, while he baptized with water, the one coming after him baptizes with the Holy Spirit. When Jesus is baptized, the Spirit descends on him.

And when we are baptized, Jesus gives us that same gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Before Jesus returned to heaven, he told his disciples that it was to their advantage that he was going away because he would send the Holy Spirit. Now Jesus could be with his followers at all times and in all places. He could fulfill his promise to be with us always. And he does this through the Holy Spirit. He gave the Holy Spirit to his first disciples at Pentecost. And he gives us the Holy Spirit and we recognize that through our baptisms.

And the Holy Spirit that helps us to grow in that relationship. The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God and the Church to help us become the people that God has called us to be. The Holy Spirit helps us to become Holy. And that is also what it means to be baptized.

In baptism we are set on a new path in this life, a new journey, a journey toward becoming more and more the person that God created us to be. It is a journey with fits and starts, to be sure. We make mistakes; we sin; we stumble and fall. But we get up; we are forgiven; and we begin again. And it is the Holy Spirit that guides us through all of this, who has the God-given task of making us holy, of making us more and more like Jesus. Martin Luther reminds us that this will not be complete until our death, when in an instant it will all be accomplished. But in the meantime, the Holy Spirit brings us into a church community, where we learn and grow together; we become more and more holy by becoming more and more like Jesus.

And the third and final thing that took place when Jesus was baptized was that he heard a voice from heaven. It is the voice of our heavenly father, our creator, our nurturing and loving mother. It is this voice of God that spoke these wonderful words to Jesus:

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased.”

Think of how encouraging these words must have been to Jesus, as he began his public ministry. And as he faced challenges, he must have returned to this experience often - as the devil is tempting him in the wilderness; as the religious leaders are challenging him; as the crowds embrace him and then reject him; as his own disciples abandon him. How many times must Jesus have reminded himself of these words, that he is God’s beloved son, with whom God is well pleased?

But these words are not just for Jesus. When we are baptized, we become one with Christ. All of God’s love for Jesus is now given to us. We are now God’s beloved sons and daughters. God is now well pleased with us. This, too, is what it means to be baptized into Christ. And isn’t this a wonderful thing to remember at the beginning of a new year? Not focusing on what is wrong with us, on what we need to improve; but instead focusing on the amazing truth that we are already God’s beloved children.

God is already well pleased with us. Imagine beginning each day this year by simply reminding yourself of this, that you are God’s beloved child?

In her book, Michele Obama writes that the husband of a friend will stand before a mirror each morning before work and speak to himself out loud. He gives himself a pep talk, tells himself he is great at what he does. He does this so that he can start his day with confidence and optimism. What would it do to us if each morning we looked at ourselves in the mirror and told ourselves out loud that we are the beloved, precious son or daughter of God; that we are most loved just as we are; that we have the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit within us and that today is good, because we walk through it not alone but with the Holy Spirit. What a relief, right? Freed from trying to earn that love, you and I can simply receive it. And when we know that and trust in that gift and that love, then we can give it away to those who also need to know that love and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that they too no longer have to fear but can live in hope.

Imagine what a difference that would make if we all did that; if we began this new year and each new day reminding ourselves of that and living into that baptism, leaning into life with the knowledge that we are God's beloved children. But imagine what it would be life for everyone in this weary world to believe that too, that they are the beloved children of God? We know it, but we sometimes forget it, and when we do, we have only to remember our baptisms. But there are many who don't know it, who don't believe it, who have forgotten it. Our neighbors, our coworkers, our students, or our teachers, or those even in other parts of the world who feel abandoned by God, abandoned by those who say they walk in faith beside them. Think of who in your life might need to be reminded of this simple, freeing truth - that they are God's beloved children, and that God is well pleased with them. What a wonderful way to begin a new year.

Today is a day of new beginnings. The second Sunday of a new year. And a day when we remember that we have been baptized into Christ. Heaven has been opened to us. The Holy Spirit has been given to us. And God's love has been promised to us. We don't have to spend this year proving ourselves, saving ourselves, or earning God's love. We have been freed from all that. And being freed from all of that gives us the energy, and the courage, and the desire, to spend this year loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. And, regardless of what happens this year, remember this one precious thing: that you are God's beloved child, with whom God is well pleased. Thanks be to God. Amen.



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