

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas J. Brown, on Sunday, 8 January 2012, the Baptism of our Lord. To God be the glory.

Since 1904 infants and adults have been baptized here--with water, with light that streams through that window over the high altar, and with parents and godparents who offer themselves, humbly and joyfully, trusting that what they're doing matters.

A year from now we're headed to the Holy Land--a group from this parish--maybe it will include you yourself. And while we're there we'll make it to the Jordan, the very place where the water for today's baptism came from, thanks to Jack & Peggy Roll, who were there a couple of months ago.

You just heard the story. Jesus stood in line to be baptized by a guy who made his own clothes, who offered alternative worship services for free in the open air as a direct challenge to the established tradition--they were at the temple in Jerusalem--doing things properly and in good order. Mark just tells the story as economically as ever, in three short verses:

- 1) Jesus walked all the way to Judea to be baptized by John, just like everybody else looking for a fresh start;
- 2) When Jesus came up out of the water he saw the heavens torn apart, and the spirit of God drifting down upon him like a dove;
- 3) Then a voice came out of the sky--"you are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Without taking anything away from Jesus, I don't think his baptism is just about him. I think it's about God. The God who re-opened the world. If you live life scared the sky will never open, or scared the sky will fall, then today is your day. If you thought there was something there,--a new life, a second chance, a second birth--you might walk from Galilee to Judea too. There is! Three things are going on here: the water, the light, and the offering. The water isn't much. It's not like the St. Lawrence River, or the Mississippi, but for a river in the middle of nowhere the Jordan is just fine. It has plenty in it to sustain life around and in it.

Our first reading from Genesis reminds us that God looked into the face of the deep and started saying things that brought those things into being. God said light and there was light, and creatures were born by the grace of God, and water. And God put a river in the garden to renew those first of God's loved ones. Water is big in the Bible. When there's water in a story it usually means something huge is about to happen.

- A desperate Hebrew mother puts her baby boy in a basket and watches him float down a river;
- A whole people flee for their lives, stop as the Red Sea parts for them to cross;
- A man who walks from Galilee to Judea is about to ask his cousin to baptize him, and as he emerges, he's God's newest creation.

This happens in a shallow muddy river in the middle of nowhere, but once you learn the pattern it can happen anywhere. Even here. All we need is God, the water of creation, and someone willing to get wet. Plus holy water isn't hard to find. It's found all over the Bible, and in Lake Superior, and in your tear ducts, and in mothers wombs.

But it's not just about water. At the baptism the voice is clear: you are my son the beloved and in you I am well pleased.

A new light shines. God loves him, and you, and me. The water, and the light unite heaven and earth. Like it is here, and always has been.

The same way Jesus offers himself to John this day, he does with us, and with Madeline Maxine, and every other baptized one. He does this with complete humility, with willingness to be changed, and he does this ready to sink down into the earth as far as he needs to go in order to be useful to God.

At this point in the story, the point of offering, specifically Jesus self-offering, my courage fails. I won't ever offer myself the way he did. Yet God invites you and me to take part in renewing things, every day, every year, all the time. The miracle is that almost any offering will do. God can use anything. Five loaves and two fishes. A cup of cold water. A turned cheek. A widow's mite. Give what you have to give, and God makes more of it. All John had was a home-made blessing, and look what God did with that.

If this is a story for the whole world, then here's the good news. By water and the spirit creation is open for business again, giving anybody a chance to join in the work. We can live into the wholeness of that whenever we're ready.

What this means is that we really are, every one of us, next in line, behind Jesus, at least anyone who wants to be. Some of us will want to stay on the riverbank and watch, but alas, it doesn't work that way.

Whatever you have to offer will do. Once you step into the water you'll find someone waiting to meet you,. From there, you'll see with your own eyes that there's a whole world waiting to see what happens next.