

## **Sermon: A New Beginning**

1/10/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Just over a month ago, we heard the Reverend Marilyn Allen preach on and proclaim the lead up to today's Gospel lesson. We heard how John the Baptist emerged from the wilderness and began calling on his fellow Jews to repent and be baptized. And we heard how, in response, Jews from across Judea came to the River Jordan. Now, the Jordan wasn't just any old river. It was where Joshua had brought the Israelites into the Promised Land. It was where Israel had left behind the misery of slavery and of forty years wandering in the desert, and assumed their rightful place as God's chosen people. The Jordan River was, in other words, the place where Israel itself had been baptized so long ago. And now, it was where John was calling on them to be baptized once again, for the arrival of their long-awaited Messiah was at hand and they needed to be prepared; prepared not just to be baptized with water, but with fire and the Holy Spirit.

So there John was at the Jordan River, baptizing his fellow Jews, when Jesus approaches him. "Finally," I can imagine John thinking to himself, "the time has come for Jesus to begin baptizing in the way that only he can. The time has come for a little fire and the Spirit." So imagine his surprise when Jesus does not offer his thanks and tell John that his services are no longer required. Rather, Jesus asks John to baptize him. "Wait, what," I can hear John respond, confused by the request. "Why should I baptize you when you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one whom God has sent to save us? Baptism is the act through which our sins are washed away and we are made right with God, and you have never sinned. Shouldn't you be the one

baptizing me, rather than the other way around?” Well, as it turns out, there was a very good reason why Jesus needed to be baptized.

Many years ago, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus famously said: “What has not been assumed has not been healed.” What he meant by this is that God could save us, all of us, if God did not truly become us. Before Jesus, God had made us, breathed life into us, and had some sense of what it meant to be human, of our strength and courage, as well as our weakness and frailty. But God did not truly know what it means to be human until God became human. God needed to be limited by a body, to experience human emotions, like being brought to tears and to laughter, and to become sick and die. In order to save us and all that we are, God needed to experience all that it means to be human. We hear in Scripture that we have all been called to be baptized. It is meant to be a part of the human experience. That, at least in part, is why Jesus needed to be baptized. He needed to feel the water on his skin and the presence of the Spirit in his life. He needed to experience these things, so that baptism might have the same transformative affect in our lives.

After hearing Jesus make his case, John was convinced. He invited Jesus into the Jordan River, where the Son of God felt the chill of the water on his skin, the mud between his toes, his head going under, and the need to come back up for air—air which he needed to breath. And when Jesus emerged, he, John, and everyone else gathered there witnessed the most amazing sight: the heavens opened up and the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove, followed by a voice from heaven declaring, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” A sight filled with such depth and meaning that it ties together the entire Christian story, from Genesis to today. Let me explain.

When you picture a dove coming over the water, what do you think of? I imagine that most of us, and indeed most Christians, think of Jesus' baptism. For the Jews gathered around the Jordan River, however, what would have first entered their minds was Noah. After the entire earth, or at least what felt like the entire earth, had flooded, Noah sent out a dove. The first time it came back empty-beaked, so Noah sent out the dove again. This time it came back with a twig, a sign of life and land; a sign that has and will continue to be printed on Christmas cards for eternity. Finally, Noah sent out the dove a third time, at which point the dove did not come back. The waters were subsiding, and as each rainbow reminds us, will never rise again. But God's promise to never again destroy the earth presented God with a problem. Even after such death and destruction, the earth remained full of sin. Which begs the question: what, then, should God do? We hear in the Old Testament several ways in which God attempted to address the problem; most notably, by sending the prophets and exiling the Israelites for their unfaithfulness. But nothing worked, at least until God sent Jesus. At Jesus' baptism, we hear of the day when Noah's dove finally came back, when salvation quite literally came home to roost. Who would have ever guessed that central to the story of Noah is baptism, being born anew out of the waters?

So in the dove we see a new beginning. We see God renewing and restoring Israel's history, so that all of God's children might once and for all be freed from their sin and live holy lives. We also see a new beginning when God proclaims that Jesus is "my Son, the Beloved." For most of the Jews gathered that day, these words could have only meant one person. After all, there is only one time in the entire Old Testament that they were ever used. And the story of this "beloved son" is one that sends shivers down our spines. It is the story told in Genesis 22, when God tells Abraham to "Take your son, your beloved son, and offer him as a burnt offering." Now, as we know, Abraham obeyed God's command and was at the point of killing his son,

Isaac, when God intervened and had him offer a ram instead. It is through these words in today's Gospel lesson, "my beloved Son," that we see Abraham's call to obedience renewed and restored. Renewed and restored in Jesus not just that day, but all the way to the cross. The day that God's beloved Son, the Lamb of God—or should it be ram of God?—was sacrificed for all our sins, to save us all.

And so, in Jesus' baptism, the Israelites were offered a chance at a new beginning. The same is true for us gathered here today. Through Jesus' baptism, we are reminded that God made and breathed life into each one of us. God made each one of us just the way we are because God wants someone just like us. In some ways we are like everyone else. But there are also ways in which we are unique and can never be duplicated. We all have unique experiences and histories, and because of this, there are some things in this world that only we can do, and will remain undone until we do so. These are the things that God has created us to do. We may not yet know what they are, and that's okay. I'm still figuring it out too. The important thing is that when those moments come, when we gain glimpses into what God has created us to do and be, we are ready and respond.

Jesus' baptism also presents us with a covenant, just like God offered to Noah. This covenant, to be God's, is what baptism embodies, and our baptismal covenant is simply this: to place everything we are and have in God's hands. Everything we are and have is a gift from God. For this reason, being in relationship with God is not about God giving us everything we want and need, right up to the point where we no longer need God. Rather, it's about always leaving room for God. Leaving room not only so that we might give thanks for all that God has given us, but so that when we make mistakes, God might have room to offer us forgiveness and help us make amends.

Finally, in Jesus' baptism we hear that we have all been called. And if our call is anything like Abraham's, then at some point along the way we will encounter trial and tribulation. Following God's call is not always going to be easy and without risk. But we need not fear, for the last four words of today's Gospel lesson apply as much to us worshiping here today as they did to Jesus back then. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." God is overjoyed with us. Not because we are so fabulous in and of ourselves, with all our brains or looks or money or athletic prowess. But because whenever God looks upon us, God sees Jesus. God is overjoyed with us because Jesus assumed everything that it means to be human and, even in the midst of his trials and tribulations, never wavered. Jesus showed us through his life, death, and resurrection what it means to love God with our entire heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves, and has called us to do so as well.

Truly, baptism is a sign of new beginnings. A sign that Jesus instituted that day and offers to each one of us. As we leave this time of worship, my hope and prayer is that we will remember our baptism and be thankful, and that we will always seek to live in accordance with the covenant that God has made with us: one in which we are called to love God and our neighbor, to seek justice and righteousness, and to spend each and every day following the example set forth by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of God. Amen.