

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The First Sunday After The Epiphany
10 January 2016

Scripture readings:

Genesis 1:1-5 Psalm 29 Acts 19:1-7 Mark 1:4-11

When the Church celebrates the baptism of Jesus so quickly after Christmas I wonder whether or not there was some kind of subtle argument being made or whether or not it's an invitation for us to make the argument about infant baptism in the life of the Church. You're fully aware that this account of Jesus' baptism is the account of a baptism of an adult. If you think that the early Church was somehow more perfect than the current Church, it doesn't take much reading today, does it, to realize that there was an early discussion about the significance and kind of baptism. The infant baptism thing has often been argued on the scriptural indication that people went to be baptized - men, women and children.

There is a theological difference being made in the text today about the baptism of John for the repentance of sins and this baptism of Jesus where he comes up out of the water and this very significant and very clearly made difference being made of the presence or absence of the Holy Spirit at baptism. The Holy Spirit apparently was absent in the baptism of John but very, very present when Jesus got baptized. This is where we get the concept of a triune God as being two men and a bird. *[laughter]* The Holy Spirit being depicted as a dove who descends from heaven and the voice of God whose voice is used in the films - the big deep voice of James Earl Jones, Charlton Heston, you know all those people: *"This is my beloved Son. In him I am well pleased."*

Well frankly, I don't think anything different happens at every baptism we celebrate here. I really don't. I think the Church's celebration of the sacrament of baptism is precisely what we encounter in the account of the baptism of Jesus in scripture. That's why I'm not fussed about what age anybody is when he or she is baptized. Baptism in the liturgical tradition of the Church is a sacrament, and sacraments are always defined as an act of God. There are those traditions, and they are reasonable traditions, which say, *"How can you baptize a baby who doesn't even know what's going on? There's no age of recognition. There's no choice involved. There's no deciding to join the Church. No, you really have to wait until people are old enough to make up their own minds."*

I had that discussion with somebody at the eight o'clock. *"I was baptized as an infant and I decided that my daughter should grow up and decide when she was going to be baptized in the service. She chose to be baptized."* You know there are a variety of different ways of approaching these things. And let's not fall into the argument about who's right and wrong. I'd hate to be that wrong all the time.

But the tradition we inherit, where we baptize children, I think emphasizes that part of the argument which says baptism is an act, a pure act of a loving God and the expression of that loving God's love for that individual piece of creation who is receiving that sacrament at that point in most cases in our tradition before the age of cognition, in infancy, before the ability to think or make up one's mind or do much more than mess a diaper and make a mess and cry for food and carry on when unhappy.

I think in the celebration of baptism in our tradition we can honestly say that in some respect the heavens open and the voice of Almighty God is heard through the medium of the Church, the gathered people of God, saying to that little infant, *"You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased."* That sacrament is the voice of God expressed through the Body of Christ, the Church, to that individual so

that each of us, every last baptized one of us, knows for a fact from our earliest days that we are created by a loving God and that we are brought into being by God's love. And God's love is shared with us most directly and physically, not spiritually, *physically* through the parents who bring us into this world.

In the first lesson you saw a very intimate connection between water and light. *"Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light."* And this is after the wind of God swept over the face of the waters so in creation we have water and light as the first concerns. *"And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day and the darkness Night."*

Every human being who is born passes through the waters that are broken by her or his mother before birth. All of us come from those waters which I am willing to say are universal waters of baptism and a sign, a universal sign of God's love. Who knows the Spanish expression for being born? Three words: to bear or give birth is to *dar a luz*. *Dar* is to give, *a* to, *luz* is light. So to give birth is to give to the light a child who has passed through the waters. So the images from Genesis, chapter one - we're talking about the first words of the Bible - the images and the intimate relationship of water and light are profoundly and very clearly related to the business of God's expression of love to all people, to all who come through the waters of the birth canal into the light of this world.

Now scripture, in its theological argument about the difference between John's baptism and Jesus' baptism has to do with the presence of the Holy Spirit, the bird part of God - the bird part that descends on Jesus with this extraordinary proclamation from the Almighty God that *"This is my beloved Son, and I am pleased with my child."* Nothing less, it seems to me, is said at every baptism that is celebrated here and for every child, adult, teenager or whoever is baptized here. And the way we make the image of that Holy Spirit in baptism is by the use of oil. So it is on Holy Thursday at the cathedral several different kinds of oil are set aside for use in baptism, anointing of the sick, confirmation and ordination. The oil for baptism is called *chrisom*. It's got perfume in it, and it is that oil with which we anoint the child as a sign of the descent of the Holy Spirit to that particular individual with the affirmation from the voice of God made audible through the Body of Christ, the Church, that *"You are my beloved daughter, you are my beloved son. I am well pleased with you."*

What's the difference between John's baptism and the baptism of Jesus? John was telling people to repent of their sins, to turn around, to go back to God. It was sort of an invitation for *them* to act. But the baptism of Jesus is a celebration of God's activity toward us. That's the one I like better because I get around to my repentance and get around to turning toward God a whole lot more slowly and a whole lot less effectively than God does God's job of coming toward me. God's affirmation of my existence by virtue of God's love is an all-the-time-everywhere thing. And the sacraments of the Church underwrite, support, and encourage that understanding of the love of the Almighty for every human being in the world. And that's where the business of sacraments may not even be known but the waters of the birth canal and the light of the world are known at every birth of every child in every corner of the world that somehow even where God's name is not known, God's love, in fact, is because without that love there is no life.

A little more vividly than here perhaps at the eight o'clock we were dealing with the presence of a family who celebrated a funeral yesterday and a family who was planning a funeral for a woman who died on Friday. You know, when we come to this place with all that is important and affects our lives, we come here to hear good news. And what is the good news that we experience when we deal with

death, and all of us do and have to and will deal with death. What *is* the good news? It's a fair question.

I sat at the dinner table of a woman who has struggled with cancer for six years this past week and celebrated on their dining room table the sacrament which we will come to here soon. After a lovely meal and this sacred meal affirming what it is that is proclaimed in baptism - God's love, God's presence, God's satisfaction and God's intention to feed, encourage and nurture us, the question was asked, "*Why does it happen this way?*" A fair question. Why? It seems so unfair. Those who seem to do so poorly with their lives seem to have plenty of it...no disease...sometimes that's just a crippled viewpoint, isn't it?

And that's the kind of thinking that was fashionable in the Church no too long ago in the Middle Ages. That wasn't *that* long ago, was it? Does anybody remember the Middle Ages? The Church cashed in big time on that. "*You're good, you give us your money, and we get you into heaven. You're bad, you don't, you go to hell.*" That doesn't square with this understanding of baptism as God's proclamation of love for individuals. It doesn't square with an understanding of baptism as God's activity and God's proclamation and God's desire for God's love to be known by everybody in the world. It doesn't square.

There are questions for which there are no simple answers. Let's agree to that. The business is we're not in a contractual relationship with an angry male God who says, "*If you do it my way, I reward you, and if you don't, I punish you.*" Could we disabuse ourselves of that? Because if we don't, I think we miss the real message of Christmas which isn't a birthday party but the incarnation. We've dealt with that enough, haven't we?

This is the business of a living God whose desire is to live and to die as one of us. Now what kind of God is that? To join us in this extraordinary business of humanity and life which exists between these two ungraspable mysteries of birth and death, of coming through the waters and being given to the light and of terminating our life in this world in death. Could we agree that a Creator God who loves us so much to affirm that love in every respect and chooses to live with us in the mess that we call our lives is, in fact, a loving God who joins us in our astounded inability to understand the mystery of birth and the mystery of death by accompanying us in our life at every juncture along the way by participating in the mystery of love and by inviting us to believe that as we receive God's love, which we do not earn but which God gives to us, and as we share God's love which is not ours to own but to share, and which really isn't love until it is shared, is it? It's not a possession. It's an approach to life that when we believe that we are so much loved by the Creator and enabled by that love to share that love with others in need, that God really is known in this world and that God really has said to us - and the world will get it when they see us as we live together and with the world - that we are God's beloved children with whom God is well pleased.

There is something about the presence of the Holy Spirit which becomes a mark of the early Church. The question was asked in the scriptures today, "*What was the difference? Was the Holy Spirit there in the baptism of John?*" And the affirmation that at least it was there and very apparent in the baptism of Jesus. My question of you is, "*Will your baptisms look to the world and will our life together as the baptized people of God, will our life together look to the world as if the Holy Spirit was present or not?*" Are we in the business of beating ourselves up about the forgiveness of sins and doing the personal work of turning toward God, or can we believe that God is pleased with us as God has created us? God loves us and God invites us to love each other. There is a difference. In the first case we're invited to do part of the work of our own salvation. In the second case we're invited to believe that God

loves us enough that our salvation is God's problem, not ours, and God's gift and not ours by any act of deserving.

And so this becomes important to us in our world, and particularly I dare say in our country at this moment as we approach the presidential election and deal every day of our lives with politics - the politics of this and the politics of that, the politics of the Church and society, the politics of economics, the politics of business... You know what I'm talking about.

When we are asked to believe that I am loved by God but you are not, when we are invited to believe that those who are different are to be feared, when we are welcomed to believe that our kind is better than that kind, and when we are encouraged to believe that the exercise of love, in fact, is not effective, it denies our faith. We are, all of us, old enough to remember the reasons for the Second World War when an absolutely insane man convinced one group of people to be afraid of another because of difference. It *can* happen, and it is not reflective of who we are as a baptized people. It's fascinating, isn't it, that the people who were taught to be afraid of others were taught to hate the kind of person that Jesus himself was, to be afraid of the kind of person whom Jesus was, to negate and obliterate people who were Jesus' descendants, who read the same scriptures that he read. Funny, isn't it? And who on the basis of Christianity were encouraged to believe that Jesus said something that he didn't.

We must remember that Jesus upset the Church, society, government and economy. The best image of Jesus upsetting the economy is overturning the tables of the money changers in the temple. And he said things about people being loved by God and therefore loving each other that the Church was not willing to say, the society was not willing to say, government was not willing to say, the economy was not willing to support. And he paid for that with his life. But he wouldn't back down from it because he believed in a couple of things: he believed in his baptism. He believed that in his baptism God said to him, "*You, in fact, are my child and I love you.*" And he lived as if he believed what God believed in him. And that was costly. It didn't make his life easy. It didn't earn him a pink Cadillac. He didn't even have a very easy relationship with his own mother. But he did have relationships with people, many of whom were unacceptable to those closest to him - the tax collector, the publican, the sinner, the leper, the woman with an issue of blood, the foreigner, the Samaritan, the geek, the gook, the immigrant, and all those other people.

He would not be moved from his belief that all were God's children, beloved and created by God, baptized in the waters of the birth canal, brought to the light of this creation and invited to live in a brotherhood and sisterhood in a mystery bracketed by two great mysteries, birth and death, in the mystery in between we know as love. And the more love, it seems to me, that exists between those two great mysteries the less confounding those great mysteries will become. If we are brought into being by a mystery and we conclude our existence in a mystery, maybe it's worth our while to believe that we can live in the mystery of divine love and allow that to change our lives because we believe, teach and confess that in our baptism God says way more to us than we have to say to God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.