

A Sermon for the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, 2015  
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You know, if you were a member of the Orthodox Church, the twelve days of Christmas would have only just begun, and the feast of the Epiphany, which we celebrated on Tuesday, wouldn't be here until January nineteenth. I only mention this because in the Orthodox churches, the gospel lesson you would hear read on Epiphany is not the story of the visit of the Magi, but the reading we just heard about the baptism of Jesus. For the Orthodox, this is the primary story of God's manifestation, which they call by an even stronger word than "epiphany." They call it "theophany," the blazing forth of God.

Why this story in particular? Well it's not because the Orthodox have such a high theology of baptism (although they do), but because this is the only story in all of the gospel accounts where all three persons of the Trinity are named as present – and are acting in the world. There's Jesus, of course, obediently but surprisingly being baptized in the river Jordan. There's the Holy Spirit, descending like a dove from the heavens to Jesus, And there's the voice of God, heard blessing Jesus, and claiming him as beloved Son. God the creator, the first person of the Holy Trinity, doesn't show up in person much in the gospels. Jesus mentions God a lot, of course: talks to

God, talks about God, teaches others to do the same. But there's only one other personal appearance, at the Transfiguration, where God does and says the exact same thing as in today's story. The rest of the time it's angels and prophets and especially Jesus speaking on God's behalf.

So what are we to learn from this unique "blazing forth" of God in all three persons at Jesus' baptism? Other than that Jesus' baptism was taken seriously enough that the whole family showed up?

First off, notice what the three of them are doing. Jesus is doing what he always does: being fully human, fulfilling and yet somehow subverting rules and expectations in a single action, turning over social understandings of power and priority just by showing up – being a different kind of Messiah than everyone was expecting.

The Holy Spirit is paracleting away: mediating between the divine and the earthly, and in so doing showing that the two are intimately connected, that God has both the will and the means to act in human lives.

And then there's God the creator. That voice, doing again the most important act from the creation story, which is not the making itself but the divine assessment: "It is good." "Behold my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." This final quality report, both in the creation story and in the gospels, is the part of the creative act that is most often ignored, both in our

lack of respect for the things and people God made and declared to be good, and in the contrary assessment of Jesus, made in his lifetime and after by so many. Humankind has not always been as well-pleased with Jesus as God was.

So God is revealed to us in all God's three-personed godliness in the moment of Jesus' baptism. It is a moment we uniquely recall when we baptize; when you were baptized. In communion we call on the risen Jesus to be known to us in the breaking of the bread, but in baptism we expect all three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to be present and involved.

We pledge ourselves to them, all three, in the Apostle's Creed, but in the rest of the Baptismal Covenant, which you will have a chance to renew in a few minutes, we also pledge ourselves to do the same things that God is doing in the Theophany at Jesus' baptism.

We pledge to continue in the Apostles' teaching, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers, and to persevere in resisting evil, and whenever we fall into sin to repent and return to the Lord. In other words, we pledge to embrace being fully human – to live into (and occasionally to subvert or transform) the stories and traditions that we have been handed, and to hand them on to our children. And we pledge to recognize that our failings, our

shortcoming, our sins, do not set us beyond the reach of God's love; that God is always ready to love us and to receive us when we repent.

We pledge to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ. This is Holy Spirit work – to be the messenger and message to those who ache to hear of and to experience the love of God. We, like that dove, are bearers of God's Word, and our Baptismal Covenant reminds us of the seriousness and solemnity of the charge to carry the good news to the ends of the earth.

And finally, we pledge to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. Do you see how those pledges give life and force to the recognition of God's proclamation of the goodness of creation and of Jesus? The indignities, the uncharitableness, the cruelty that we visit on one another and on the world reflect a failure to embrace the goodness, the God-pleasing rightness of all that God has made, of all that has been given into our care.

And the great thing about these pledges is that they make wonderful touchstones. They are an easy to carry with you guide to Godly action.

When I am cross with someone, or am making judgments about him or her, am I truly seeking Christ in that person? And whether I find the Christ that I know is there in that person, are my choices and actions serving Christ?

Am I, by my words and actions at this moment, showing the world the good news about God in Christ – that the embrace of love reaches beyond all boundaries to draw the children of God together – that God can and does love you, can and does love me extravagantly, passionately, limitlessly?

And perhaps most importantly, for ourselves and for our institutions, am I respecting the dignity of every human being? Do the choices I am making right now, that my family, or committee, or Vestry are making today honor and uphold the dignity of every person those decisions will affect?

Because if not, if the answer to any of those questions is “no,” our Baptismal Covenant, and indeed the love and example of God, calls on us to make different choices, to keep struggling with our choices, to keep learning from and repenting our mistakes, until we can honor those pledges with our lives as well as with our words.

And when we do that – when the gospel is proclaimed in all we do, and Christ is sought and served, justice and peace are striven for, and the dignity of every human being is respected and cherished, then God will blaze forth again and again, and we shall all be well pleased. Amen.