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St. James', Mt. Airy
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Baptism of Christ
Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29, Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

At Jesus' baptism, the heavens were torn apart and the Spirit descended upon him.

Here, right now, we are living in torn open times – and we need the power of the Spirit in our midst more than ever.

One of the things I value about our St. James' community is that we're not an echo-chamber. We're a "purple" parish with a mixture of people with differing views and there is most often grace-filled space for conversation – true conversation, not arguing to convince, but talking to know one another better and to listen.

Whether it's because we're not physically together as the pandemic continues to cut a swath through our nation, or because the embers of division have exploded into a full blown fire – we're struggling. And we're not alone.

Our nation is at a critical point, when an attack on our Capital doesn't unify us, but instead continues to divide us further. What common ground can we stand on?

Our Presiding Bishop, in his Word to the Church: *Who Shall We Be?*, has called us to the task of “unselfish, sacrificial love, love that seeks the good and the welfare and the well-being of others, as well as the self, ... this is the way that can lead us and guide us to do what is just, to do what is right, to do what is merciful. It is the way that can lead us beyond the chaos to community.”¹

To those who would say this is naïve, he reminds us that Jesus spoke most consistently about love the closer he got to the cross. Not sentimental love, but love rooted in truth and reconciliation – things that bring true life.

I believe this is the way forward for our nation, and for us at St. James’.

Love can only flourish when we tend to our hearts. We need to water our hearts with good things, and then walk through them picking out rocks and weeds, because love needs good soil.²

Trauma cracks your heart open, but to paraphrase Leonard Cohen, the crack is what lets the light in.

The cracks that are being revealed right now are the same cracks through which God’s light and Spirit will reach us. But it is up to us to turn towards the light and accept the Spirit into our hearts. Because walking the path of truth and reconciliation is not easy, and it forces us to face one another, and ourselves, unflinchingly.

As James Baldwin said in his book *The Fire Next Time*, “I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once the hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.”

¹ <https://episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-currys-word-church-who-shall-we-be>

² Paraphrase of a quote by Liezel Graham.

Hate is easy, love is hard – and yes, it does force us to deal with the pain and to do the work of truth and reconciliation. Today, and every day, we have a choice to make – hate or love.

Which is why once again, the scripture of the day seems heaven sent.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of Christ and read about Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan.

John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus went to him for this baptism – one of the most fully human acts we see in the gospels. Jesus, as the very first act of his public ministry in Mark's gospel, sought repentance.

Repentance, which requires both truth and reconciliation, is doing the work of restoring what has been broken.

This work is at the center of our baptismal covenant. It is work we promise to do with God's help. So hear again these promises we make as baptized followers of Jesus:

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

In just a few moments, as is our practice on baptismal feast days, we will renew these baptismal vows.

As you make these promises today, I pray that you will renew your commitment to live Jesus' way of love. That you will seek to repair what has been broken. And that the cracks in your heart may be the place where the Spirit enters to provoke you to nourish the good soil of justice and peace. Amen.