

Epiphany I – The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ

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St. Martin's Church

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When I was in sixth grade, I had an illness that kept me home from school for three or four weeks. I didn't feel that bad, I just couldn't rejoin my classmates. Doctor's orders! To help pass the time I would read all those little ads that appeared in the back of "Popular Mechanics" magazine and I would send off for any free offers. Now, this particular offer wasn't free, I think it cost me a whole dollar, but it was worth it. I remember the day it came, a booklet about hypnotism and my degree from the Baltimore School of Hypnotism! It must have been a good course of instruction because I have been putting people to sleep practically every Sunday for over forty-eight years!

Today we are re-introduced to a preacher whose sermons never put anyone to sleep, John the Baptist. I climbed-up a couple of steps to get into this pulpit this morning, but John the Baptist waded into a river, or stream, to do his preaching. Standing waist-deep in the water, John bellowed. John shouted-out his bold message to the people lining the banks of the river. John did not mince words, he told people they needed to repent in order to restore their right relationship with God and that was that. No sugar coating, no soothing sentiments, just the naked truth. I am sure many of those people listening to John marveled at how well he knew them. He seemed to know all about the way they lived. John's preaching was preaching with conviction

and passion. That is what I love about him. Preaching without passion or conviction ends-up being a lot of pious sounding words and something worth sleeping through.

This particular day began like most other days for John. The banks of the river became crowded with people as John took his place in his watery pulpit. One after another they came out to him. Some cried and some remains silent and stoic in response to John's jabbing, but true, accusations of their sinful ways. Although there were hundreds, thousands even, every one of them would remember looking into John's eyes before he plunged them under the water or this ritual of cleansing and purification. As each one returned to the banks of the river they felt "different" somehow. They felt clean. That's it - clean.

None of them left after receiving John's baptism. They joined those who had preceded them, a community of the washed and cleansed, a community of "the changed". Suddenly, abruptly, everything stopped; the seemingly endless procession into the river ceased as a solitary individual approached John. What made all of this so noticeable was that John wasn't shouting or bellowing anymore. The look on his face was one of awe and wonder. The young man, probably around thirty or so, spoke to John, presumably asking John to baptize him. Everyone watching saw John shaking his head in refusal, raising his hands as if to say he would have no part of this. The young man spoke to John again, and, reluctantly, John agreed to baptize the man whose name was Jesus. John knew in that moment that this was a day he would never forget.

The young man, Jesus, knew the same thing. For thirty years he has lived with his parents, worked alongside his foster-father, Joseph, attended synagogue and lived an

honorable, though ordinary, life. Always, though, there was a growing sense that he was to do more. John's emergence on the scene was a kind of signal to Jesus that now his mission and ministry was to begin. His descent into the River Jordan for his baptism of repentance was the bottle across the bow, the launching of his salvation-bringing journey. His submission to John's baptism was his way of identifying with the sinful humanity he has come to save.

Now, Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism by his cousin John vary. Some say everyone heard the voice from heaven, other claim that only Jesus heard the words, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased." What we know is that Jesus heard those words and he received empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The absolute proof of that is that we are here as his professed disciples!

Beloved in the Lord, this is not just another day, and I pray that this is not just another sermon to try and stay awake through. I want for myself, and I want for each of you, what we pray for in today's collect:

"Grant that all who have been baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior..."

If we are to be who we were baptized to become we must be a bold church. We must be a confessing church where the lordship of Jesus is not given "lip-service", but "life-service". May we all renew our baptismal covenant with God. May we not be content to stand on the bank of the river and listen to the call for changed lives. Rather, may we gratefully remember our own washing in the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism when we became Christ's own forever!

Do you hear that? Christ's own forever. Holy Baptism is not about his life only, a ritual to be performed like getting braces, a vaccination, or our hair cut. It is about "forever". God loves us so much that anything less than being with Him forever is unthinkable. That is what gave John the Baptist a zeal for souls, his passion for the people. It was not just a matter of getting folks to live "nice" lives, it was a matter of restoring a right relationship with God that would last forever, a relationship that will never end.

*\*Action - swinging pocket watch like a hypnotist\**

You will remember all this and be really happy about it and you will say, "I am so happy to be baptized!"

I am so happy to be baptized.

Amen.