

“Walking Together” – Epiphany 1B
Rev. Jennifer Adams – Sunday, 01/11/2009

This Sunday is the first Sunday of Epiphany which is always the Sunday on which we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord. We hear the story from either Matthew, Mark or Luke of that day at the river Jordan when Jesus was baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist. And often on this day we as a community of faith celebrate baptism welcoming people into the household of God right here at Grace Church. This morning we have three who will be baptized (there were going to be five but one family couldn't make it back in from Chicago yesterday due to the weather – we'll catch them in a few weeks.) So, today we celebrate the baptism of our Lord and the baptisms of Derek, Owen and James and while we do that we also renew our own baptismal covenant as people of faith.

And so I thought it might be a good Sunday to talk a little bit about what it is that we're doing here. Now we could do a year long class or longer on the theology of baptism. There is a lot to be said about what baptism is and what baptism is not. But this morning what I'd like to do is simply highlight two things, two points about baptism that are present in the gospel story too.

And so we'll ground ourselves in the gospel of Mark and take it from there. Notice that it wasn't a formal setting at all. Jesus' baptism took place down at the Jordan and the presider wasn't clothed in anything like a white robe and a stole; John wore camels hair with a leather belt around his waist. The guests looked a little different too at least on the outside – this was not your relatively tasteful gathering of Episcopalians, these were the folks that had hiked out into the desert seeking repentance and forgiveness and some sort of hope and they were probably pretty ragged and hungry. Many of them were likely on their last legs searching for anything that resembled a new beginning. They were known to be sinners and outcasts and there were probably also a few pharisees who made the trip out too, pharisees who had been sent to get a sense of exactly what was going on out there.

And what was going on was that Jesus got into the water with John and all the rest of them. And that's the first point I want to highlight for us today. Jesus didn't ask John to come into town in order to make his baptism a different sort of occasion. He didn't stand on the shore cheering on the sinners who really needed to get dunked. He didn't even step in as the one who was to be the baptizer. Down at the Jordan, Jesus stood in the water next to the guy who had robbed the temple and was living with that load of guilt, he was knee deep near the woman who had lied her way through life and couldn't quite find a way back, and he got soaked along with the schmuck who had stolen from his neighbor and wasn't able to give back – Jesus with all of them and in doing so he established from the very beginning of his ministry where and with whom he stood. “God with us” meant being in the river with us, in the flesh with us, in the sorrow and repentance and the joy of new life with us.” And that's part of what baptism is about.

At baptism we commit to standing together, walking together, growing, weeping and working together with the whole body of the faithful. At baptism we become the body of the faithful is often faithful and sometimes not, but has at the very least has committed to doing life and faith together as a community of forgiveness and new beginnings and hope. Which doesn't mean we don't walk with those who are not us. In our baptismal covenant we commit to working for justice and peace which is in itself a strong statement about where and with whom we stand. We promise to see Christ in all people and to respect the dignity of every human being. And so Baptism is both our building of a faithful, focused community and it's our dive into the whole river of humanity where God in Christ already stands waiting for the rest of us to jump in and soak ourselves in the welcome and love that is there for all.

The other part of this story that I want to hold up and connect with us today is that at Jesus' baptism the heavens opened and God said, “This is my Son, my beloved with whom I am well pleased.” The Spirit descended and Jesus was proclaimed the beloved of God. At baptism we hear that voice too, we are the voice that proclaims to Derek and Owen and James that they are beloveds. We sing and we celebrate; we anoint in the presence of the Spirit and name one another as Christ's own. Which doesn't mean that those who are not baptized are not beloved. It doesn't work that way. What it means is that at baptism we name and embrace that which God has already given us and I believe God has given all people – the gift of being a beloved child of

God no matter what our age or background or size or shape or race or gender or no matter anything. At baptism we celebrate a gift that is already there; we pick it up and we put it on and we claim a life that reflects that gift of belovedness to the world. And through the vows we make we promise in the Covenant to see that all people have been given the gift too, as we commit to striving for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of all human beings and seeking and serving Christ in all people.

And so while we could go on for hours and hours, let it be enough for today for us to gather at the river, in the river with God, Derek, Owen, James and a whole wide, odd, broad, needy, gifted, sinful, hopeful, forgiven, searching, found, ragged, hungry and loved pool of humanity celebrating that the heavens have opened, the Spirit has come and we are Children of God, beloveds of God one and all.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" ',

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'