

First Sunday after the Epiphany—Baptism of Jesus – Year C—The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 1.9.21
Isaiah 43:1-7, Psalm 29, Acts 8:14-17, Luke 3: 15-17,21-22

Happy New Year! - A bit belatedly what with snow and ice, and Omicron. None the less it is the beginning of a new, fresh year. A year filled with expectations and questions. What will the year hold for each of us personally and for St. Augustine's as a community of faith? Like the people on the banks of the Jordan River, we are a people filled with hope for a new beginning a fresh and better time to come. We are optimistic because we are people of faith, even if that optimism is a bit frayed at times.

The new year is a time when many make resolutions. January, I am told is the month when the most home exercise equipment is sold. It is the month out of all others when the most people join a gym. January is the time of hope and a renewed resolve that things will be different.

We have left behind the twelve days of Christmas with the stable, the poinsettia's, the trees and ornaments. We have left behind the angels, shepherds, and even the wise men. We have left behind the infant Jesus with his somewhat bewildered and anxious parents, Mary and Joseph.

We are entering into the season of Epiphany. This is the season of light, of revelation and of new beginnings. Luke's gospel tells us of transition. John the Baptist had been preaching throughout the area and had acquired a number of disciples, a large crowd of followers. John was about to diminish after one last important action. John had been preaching a baptism of confession of sin, repentance and a return to the law of Moses. It was a baptism of water actually of immersion into the River Jordan.

We think of baptism as a Christian rite of passage and so it is. But baptism is not unique to Christianity. Baptism in the sense of washing, of cleansing, was well known in Judaism. What John was doing was recognized as a continuation of the ancient ways. A return to the paths of right living and right behavior. Yet John knew that he was the one preparing the way for one who was to come after and one who was more powerful than he. He knew that God was doing something new. And that is what he told the people that day on the banks of the Jordan.

Jesus was there that day, simply one young 30-year-old man, one among many people. He came, quietly, without fanfare, almost unobtrusively in response to God's call. In this account of his baptism, it is noteworthy that Jesus apparently went to the end of a long line of people waiting to be baptized. We are told that everyone came first and only then was Jesus baptized. "...when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized..." wrote Luke.

The Gospel of John tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among human beings. Actually pitched a tent in the midst of human beings. Luke tells us the same thing, relating that Jesus was last to be baptized that day. Jesus demonstrating that he was someone human beings could relate to, be in relationship with. Jesus was demonstrating that he was one of us.

What came next, quietly, surprisingly and again without a great fanfare, demonstrates to us how we can be in relationship with Jesus, both human and divine. It shows us how we can be in relationship God.

Having been baptized, washed with water, Jesus' first activity is to pray. His response to baptism was to wait and to listen for God's voice. And then the miracle happened. The heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended "in bodily form, like a dove." It was the sign for all the people that this was the one of whom John had spoken, the one whom they were to follow into the new beginning that God had in store for them.

In a few moments we will relive our own baptismal experience, whenever that may have occurred. We were, as infants, children, or adults, washed with water, anointed with oil and marked as one of Christ's own forever. We had the same experience as Jesus, that day at the River Jordan. We received the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we might begin anew, life as a child of God.

The life of faith, the Christian life to which we commit ourselves each time we renew our baptismal vows, in a life of new beginnings. I am often reminded of the words of St. Benedict in spoken in relationship to the living of a monastic life. "Always we begin again." Always we begin again because the life of faith is a process in which we try to be faithful, sometimes, failing sometimes succeeding but always through prayer and the support of the Holy Spirit, beginning again. It has been said that true wisdom is gained not with knowledge but with practice.

The framework for the practice of the Christian life comes in the statement of what we believe and then in the promises we make before God as to the practices that help us grow in our spiritual life, our relationship to God.

In a few moments we will have an opportunity to repeat the words of our faith and the promises we make to live into that faith. We will have an opportunity to speak aloud the words of the Baptismal Covenant. These words and these promises in some form are as old as Christian faith itself. We begin with the words "I believe", different from the words of the Nicene Creed which we often say. This creed, the Apostles Creed is a baptismal creed, one which is an outline of what every Christian strives to believe and to live. The Nicene Creed, which begins "We believe" is the theological outline of faith for the church. We believe it together, even if individually we have difficulty with the parts.

A word about the word belief. Belief, like faith itself is better understood as a verb rather than a noun. To believe for the Christian is to be on a journey with a map. The statement "I believe,..." is a commitment to be on a journey to grow in knowledge, and understanding, and to be willing to accept some things on faith rather than intellect, at least until you are granted the grace to understand more fully. In the Gospel of Mark, there is the story of a father who brings his son possessed of a spirit to Jesus for healing. We can say as does this parent "I believe; help my unbelief!" And that is enough. "I believe, help my unbelief!" is the watchword given to each of us as we seek to walk the road of a disciple.

And so, we begin again with the words of faith and practice contained in the Baptismal Covenant.