

The Baptism of Our Lord
January 11-12, 2020
Matthew 3:13-17

“Walking in Newness of Life”

The Christmas decorations have all been put away, and our Sanctuary looks a little bare right now. The beautiful lights, creche, tree, wreathes, and banners – they have all gone into storage until next December. And now we face the reality of life after Christmas. With it, we face the reality – the truth – of what Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem means: it means that he is on the pathway to Calvary and the cross. The wood of Jesus’ crib will give way to the wood of Jesus’ cross. And it begins with his baptism by John in the waters of the River Jordan as we hear in today’s Gospel lesson. That same Spirit of God who hovered over the face of pre-creation waters, when **“the earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep”** (Genesis 1:2), now hovers over the waters yet again as Jesus descends down the bank into the waters of the Jordan River to be baptized – not for his sake, but for ours. Jesus’ baptism signals the beginning of his public ministry that would lead him to rejection, betrayal, suffering, and death upon the cross – for our sake. Jesus’ baptism marked him as the Father’s chosen and beloved Son who came to fulfill all righteousness. The Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are all present and together for this milestone moment: the Father who affirms that **“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”** (Matthew 3:17), the Son himself who was baptized by John, and the Holy Spirit who descended like a dove and came to rest upon Jesus. Baptism is always about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This Sunday when we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord our focus in worship is all about Baptism – Jesus’ baptism and our own. Because of all that Jesus has done for us, because of our Baptism into Jesus’ death and resurrection, we are called to walk in newness of life. That is the theme for preaching on this day. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

The Jordan River is not like the great rivers of the world: the Mississippi, the Amazon, the Nile, or the Yangtze. In comparison with these, the Jordan is pretty small stuff; more a stream than a river. But it played a significant role in salvation history. This is the place where God’s people of old entered into the Promised Land after their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness (Joshua 3-4). When the soles of the priests’ feet who bore the ark of the covenant touched the Jordan, the waters stopped flowing so that God’s people could cross on dry ground, just like they did when the Red Sea was parted so they could cross on dry ground (Exodus 14). But God’s people of old did not keep covenant with the Lord God. Again and again, they were more about themselves than God, like us. Time and again, like us they went after other gods, provoking the Lord to anger. Israel of old was sinful and disobedient, just like us. A new Israel was needed to do what old Israel could not. Enter Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God and Son of man; he is that new Israel who came to fulfill all of God’s commands. He came to do the will of God (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38), and he is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in today’s Old Testament lesson: **“Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I will put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations”** (Isaiah 42:1). And it begins with his baptism by John at the Jordan River.

When we are baptized in the Name of the Triune God, whether that water is by sprinkling, pouring, or full immersion, we are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. All that Jesus has done through his life of service, his obedience to the Father’s will, his suffering, death, and resurrection as the atoning sacrifice for all our sins – all of that is freely given to us in the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism. It is graciously bestowed upon us through the power of God who forgives and creates new life through the Word of God that is in that water. The water itself is ordinary water – straight out of the faucet in the Sacristy. Nothing fancy or special about it. The same Word of God that brought all things into being at creation, now brings forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation through this water of regeneration that is Baptism. This is what

Paul writes about in today's Epistle lesson: that we have been united with Jesus and all that he has done through Baptism, and that through this we are now called to walk in newness of life. That is our Scripture memory verse for this week: **"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life"** (Romans 6:4). Whether our Baptism took place many years ago or happened only recently, we have all been clothed with the garment of Christ's righteousness; we are all under the same banner of God's grace through this gift. And by the power of the Holy Spirit who has been given to us in Baptism, we are all called to do an about-face in life; to walk in newness of life. Every day is a new beginning; a fresh start. Day in and day out, we lay claim again and again to what God has done for us in Holy Baptism. Day in and day out, we die to sin and rise to new life in Christ. The old sinful self that was drowned in the waters of Baptism still exerts a powerful hold on us, and will continually try to get the upper hand in our lives. Luther is quoted as saying, "I thought the Old Adam drowned in the waters of Baptism, but I discovered that the miserable wretch can swim." And so it is: we struggle with sin and temptation (Hebrews 12:1) from the day of our Baptism until the day of our death. But in the midst of the struggle, we keep our eyes ever fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), who loves us and laid down his life for us. The One who was baptized for us is the One who has won the victory over sin and death for us. Staying close to Jesus, let us walk in newness of life.

Disney's 1994 animated movie, "The Lion King," is one that my girls grew up on; they watched it over and over again, which means that I watched it over and over again. After the death of his father, Mufasa, the lion king, young Simba struggles to find his way in life. He doesn't really know who he is, and that's a problem for him and everyone around him. That all changes when he sees his father in a vision, who reminds him: "Remember who you are!" And that's what I want you take away from this sermon: Remember who you are! That's what our King says to you this day. Maybe you have wandered far from that covenant of grace first given to you in Baptism. Maybe you feel like you are not worthy of God's grace because of what you have done or left undone in your life. Maybe you feel overwhelmed by the burdens of life. Maybe you feel like faith has become flat, and you've lost the joy of salvation. Whatever your situation in life may be, remember who you are! Remember God's words from Isaiah: **"A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench"** (Isaiah 42:3). By the grace of God in Jesus Christ that is poured out upon us in the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism, each day is a new beginning to remember and reclaim who you are as God's beloved children; sons and daughters of the King! Because we have been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection; we are called to walk in newness of life. That same Holy Spirit who descended upon Jesus at his baptism has also come upon us beginning in our own Baptism. The Father's voice says to each one of us that we, too, are his beloved children – not because of anything we can do, but because of what Jesus has done for us. And that is grace – undeserved forgiveness and mercy. In response to this gift of grace, let us walk in a manner worthy of our calling. Let us walk in newness of life. Amen.