

Sunday, January 7, 2018
First Sunday after the Epiphany – Baptism of Our Lord (Year B)

Genesis 1.1-5; Acts 19.1-7; Mark 1.4-11

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Show of hands. How many of you made some sort of New Year's resolution this year?

So, what kind of resolutions did you make? I seriously doubt any of you resolved in this new year to work even more hours per week. Or that any of you resolved to eat less vegetables and more desserts. Or that any of you resolved to create more stress in your life.

No, our resolutions typically are designed to help in our quest to live a better life.

- To eat better or to exercise more, as a way to better and healthier physical life.
- To save more money or to pay off debts, as a way to better financial life, and more peace of mind.
- To spend more time with family or friends, as a way to better relational life.
- To have a more positive attitude, to be more compassionate, as a way to better emotional life.
- To pray more, read the Bible more, go to church more, as a way to better spiritual life.

As we think about those ways that we can improve our lives, those ways that will help us live better lives, those ways that will lead to a new sense of life, it seems quite appropriate that today – the first Sunday in the new year – we are presented with scripture readings that all deal with new life.

Our celebration of Christmas officially ended on Friday. As of yesterday, with the celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany, we moved on to Epiphanytide, or the season after the Epiphany. Epiphany meaning “to appear” or “revelation,” and this season which runs through Ash Wednesday, focuses on the revelation of God incarnate in Jesus Christ. Or put another way, the ways in which Jesus is revealed to us as the Son of God.

The first Sunday after Epiphany is always a celebration of the Baptism of Jesus. The first instance of Jesus being explicitly revealed as the Son of God. Particularly in Mark's Gospel, which contains no birth narrative. Where Jesus, rising out of the waters of the River Jordan after being baptized by his cousin John the Baptist, sees the Holy Spirit descending on him in the form of a dove; and hears the words of God proclaiming, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mk 1.11). Where upon hearing God's words, upon receiving the Holy Spirit, Jesus experiences birth in a different sense than we celebrate at Christmas. The birth of his new identity as Emmanuel, “God with us.”

The account from Mark's gospel, as well as our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, makes it clear that this is a new baptism. In the Jewish tradition, there was a purification ritual involving immersion in water, as a means or a sign of being made ritually clean. John the Baptist appears to have used this ritual as the basis for “his” baptism, as a symbol of one's repentance of their sins. While John's baptism and Jesus' baptism are the same in terms of the use of water as a

symbol of cleansing, the major difference is that Jesus' baptism included another element – the Holy Spirit. Actually, the Holy Spirit is sort of the star of today's commemoration. All three readings include the Holy Spirit in significant ways.

In our Old Testament reading from Genesis, we hear of the very beginning of creation. That moment of transition between the time before creation – when other than God there was only a formless void – and the creation of light on the first day. We are told that before God spoke light into being, “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” A wind from God. In Hebrew, *ruach*, which also means “the Spirit from God.” It was this Spirit which swept over the formless void. That was with God from the beginning of creation, as God spoke the words that would bring forth life. New life out of nothingness. Made possible through the Spirit.

God created and continues to create new life. This same imagery of new life and the means of its creation is enacted in the baptism of Jesus as recorded in Mark's gospel. Just as at Creation, the Spirit and voice of God were also present at the baptism of Jesus. But in this act the chaos of the formless void that existed before Creation is replaced by the promise of salvation in the waters of baptism, signifying a new creation. Confirmation that this man Jesus is the Son of God. That he is Emmanuel – God incarnate, God in the flesh.

But if Jesus is the Son of God, is God in the flesh, why would he need to be baptized for repentance and for salvation? Jesus had no guilt to wash away. Yet he freely came to John and was baptized in the River Jordan. Because through his baptism, with the incorporation of the Holy Spirit into that sacramental act, something new was created for us. The new life that the Spirit witnessed at the beginning of creation, the new life of God through Christ signified by the descending of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism, is once again manifest in the sacrament of Baptism that Jesus instituted and that we ourselves participate in.

In his own baptism, even though he didn't need it, Jesus was seeking to identify himself with the spiritual needs of all humanity. As Jesus came up out of the river, he was empowered with the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit present at the creation of humanity. The same Spirit that would be present and bestowed upon the newly baptized in every act of Christian baptism henceforth. The Spirit that provides us with the direct connection with God through Jesus Christ. The Spirit that provides us with new life in this act of baptism.

Today's reading from Acts provides the connection between Jesus' baptism and the sacrament of baptism that we participate in. Christian baptism is not merely like John's, a washing to signify repentance, but is immersion into the death and resurrection of Christ. Going into the waters of baptism is the symbolic dying to self and rising to new life that is actually achieved for us through Christ's own death and resurrection. The sacrament whereby we ourselves are given the gift of salvation and new life when we share in the same baptism that Jesus did.

Okay. Now that we've covered new life in the deepest sense, let's get back to those New Year's resolutions. How many have fallen short in keeping your New Year's resolutions? Well, keep at it. It often takes some practice and some regrouping when we fail. But the important thing is to keep at it. Because the whole reason we make our resolutions is because we want a new and better life.

Baptism is kind of the same way. In our baptism, we are given a new life through Jesus Christ. We make certain promises – or if you were a baby when baptized, certain promises were made on your behalf.

In our baptismal vows

- We “renounce” Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God.”
- We “renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God”
- We “renounce all sinful desires that draw [us] from the love of God.”
- We promise to “turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as [our] Savior.”
- We promise to “put [our] whole trust in his grace and love.”
- We promise to follow and obey him as [our] Lord.”

And then we promise to fulfill these vows

- By “[continuing] in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.”
- By “[persevering] in resisting evil, and, whenever [we] fall into sin, [by repenting and returning] to the Lord.”
- By “[proclaiming] by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.”
- By “[seeking] and [serving] Christ in all persons, loving [our] neighbor as [ourselves].”
- By “[striving] for justice and peace among all people, and [respecting] the dignity of every human being.”

These are some pretty heavy-duty promises. And frankly, a lot harder to keep than resolving to diet or get more exercise. But as Christians, we promise to stick with these vows. Even when we fall short. Because we know that we do not do this alone. We are given the Holy Spirit to energize us, to empower us, to guide us, and to support us in living our baptismal covenant. We acknowledge our continual need for divine assistance by promising to fulfill these vows with the words, “I will, with God’s help.” And not only that. We also have each other – our community of faith – to help support us in this difficult, yet sacred work of living into our baptismal life. Of living into the fullness of being members of the body of Christ. Of embracing and living into the new life that promises.

This is so important, that unlike New Year’s resolutions, we do not just make these promises once year. Lest we forget, and we might at times; and lest we fall short, and we will at times; we are covered. In our tradition, we have four specified baptismal feast days – today being one of them. And on every one of those feast days, we take the opportunity to remind ourselves and to recommit to our baptismal vows – to those vows that give us new life.

As we prepare to renew our vows, I issue a challenge. Even if you’ve already made your New Year’s resolutions, add another one. If you haven’t yet made, or don’t believe in making, New Year’s resolutions, make this one. In this new year, hear the call of God’s Holy Spirit bidding you to live more fully into your baptismal life – into the new life that God has promised, that he has given, through his Son Jesus Christ.