

The Feast of the Baptism of our Lord
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
10 January 2021

Mark 1:1-5

I love prisms. According to our friends on the Internet, “A prism is a transparent optical element with flat, polished surfaces that refract light.” In other words, a prism refracts light on every side in a unique way, so that how you see reality changes in accordance with the angle, the side you are looking at, the level of clarity of the material, the intensity of the light, etc. As with various mirrors, you are not always sure what it is that you are looking at in the beautiful images and the explosions of color. In many ways, the story of the baptism of Jesus by John in the River Jordan is just like that. When you look at the story from one angle you see one message, but that message may change a bit depending on the angle.

Today we celebrate the beginning of the first of two Green Seasons in the Church. We call this time *ordinal* or *ordered* time. This first ordinal time begins and ends with the testimony of God about his son. The first time we hear God's words, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” is at the Baptism of Jesus, which we celebrate today. The second time is at the scene of the Transfiguration, where the same voice is heard and the same words are repeated. God appears in both episodes to reveal something essential about his own character and about his own son. Both proclamations act as bookends for the season.

During the next few weeks, our Epiphany Season will introduce us to several Theophanies or Epiphanies. An Epiphany is an appearing, and interaction between God and humanity in which the voice or image of God can be seen or perceived by humans. The Epiphany we have today in the Baptism of Jesus at the Jordan is an amazing event in which you can hear echoes of the entire Holy Scripture. In a hurried, unadorned, almost ironic way, Mark describes the entire event in just about 10 phrases. Yet, this is a hugely important event which appears in all four Gospels, in the Acts of the Apostles, and in the letter of Paul to the Romans. Just for contrast, the birth of Christ only appears in Matthew and Luke. Holy Scripture wants us to pay attention to this event of the Baptism of the Lord and the Epiphany contained in it.

The narrative begins by saying that, “In those days, John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” For those hearing this story, the mention of John would have reminded them of another prophet in the History of Israel. Elijah himself, some 1,000 years before John. Elijah dressed in the same type of clothing, ate the same type of nutritious and not-so-delicious food, and preached a message of repentance. His job was to awaken the love for God in the Israelites at a time of great confusion, idolatry, and corruption. A time, in fact, fairly similar to Jesus' day. The mention of John also recalls in

people's minds of the prophet Malachi, who said, "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes" (Malachi 4:5 NIV).

John the Baptist is the new Elijah whose Job it is to prepare the way for Christ. This preparation takes the form of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The text tells us that John was quite popular: "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." His ministry is going well. People are coming to him in droves and he has become a popular man. Yet, the message this popular man was preaching was not centered on his own wisdom, or on special revelation given to him alone. The message was simple: A stronger man, a more powerful man is coming into the world, "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." And here we begin to see the irony that many commentators have detected in Mark.

He begins this section by telling us that in those days, Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized by John, yet John just called Jesus, "A stronger, a more powerful man." We don't see the irony because we don't leave in that culture, but for those listening this was an outrageous statement. How can a man more powerful than this dynamic and charismatic preacher come out of Nazareth? Commentator R. T. France, says the following, "As for Nazareth, it was so insignificant a village that few in the south had even heard of it (it is not mentioned in the OT, the Talmud, or Josephus), and even a Galilean like Nathanael could dismiss it with a contemptuous, "How can anything good come out of Nazareth? (John 1:46)," (The Gospel of Mark, Page 75.) Jesus the strong man comes from the most insignificant of backgrounds and yet he is "God's own beloved son," the one with whom the Father, "Is well pleased." In this ability of God to elevate the weak to a place of prominence, as he does with Nazareth here, we see echos of the boy Samuel, King David, and Mary herself. God lifts the lowly to confuse the powerful because God's ways are not like our ways.

There is another element of irony we often miss in this passage, and that is the fact that the act being performed here is absolutely unnecessary. In fact, John the Baptist in another version of this passage protests, "I should be baptized by you and you come to me?" John doesn't want to do it because, as he has said before, he is not worthy to untie the thong of the strong man's sandals. This was an unnecessary act because John was preaching and performing a "Baptism of Repentance" and Jesus had nothing to repent about. He was born without sin, he had committed no sin, and there was no need for repentance in him. So, why do it? It is plain that Mark wants us to see Jesus as accepting a baptism of repentance on our behalf. Jesus is the "Son of Man," a title often used to speak of his humanity. As son of man, he has come to take on humanity's sin and to reconcile us to the Father. Through his baptism he begins the process of justification, which he will fully accomplish on his cross and resurrection. He accepted baptism for us!

The passage also makes it clear that Jesus, the Son of Man, is also Jesus, the “Son of God.” In fact, this is what the Holy Spirit descending on him, the heavens parting, and the voice of God attest to. The voice from heaven clearly states, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Jesus is God’s own son, the one who was with God from the beginning, who was in fact God, and through whom all things were made. Have you ever stopped to think about this? God himself has come to us and now dwells with us. Not a messenger, not a prophet, not a sage with some kind of wisdom message, but God himself. He is here and he will fulfill the mission for which he was sent. He will die on a cross for the redemption of our sins.

My friends, I find great comfort in the fact that through Baptism we are in Christ. We are his, we are his people, we are his children by adoption. Being in Christ means that we too hear the words of the Father, “You are my son, you are my daughter, in you I am well-pleased.” Through baptism into his son, we have been crucified with him that we also may live with him. It is through this baptism that we become “Beloved” of God the Father. And the good news is that God initiated this movement towards humanity. It was not anything at all we did! God, of his infinite love and compassion decided to dwell among us. Through his beloved Son, God finds us, rescues us, and accepts a Baptism of Repentance on our behalf. Then he dies for us, and adopts us as beloved children, as children of light.

As baptized Christians we have a common identity and a common mission. There is much more to unite us than there is to divide us. The sad thing is that when you look at the deep divisions in our country, you often find baptized Christians on both sides. It is as though we no longer follow the same Christ. Somehow Christ has been divided into factions, and now people on both sides claim a unique Christ not available to the other side. A fight against another baptized Christian is a fight against ourselves and a fight against Christ himself. We are one body, and even if my left ear is far away from my right foot, I need both to be fully myself. This last week, we have seen insurrection and violence. We have seen flags of “Jesus 2020,” and we have seen pundits asking what a post-American democracy would ever look like.

Do not let these voices divide you further. We are brothers and sisters. We are citizens of God’s kingdom. “Other-ism” is tempting. “Other-ism” gives us a blank screen against which to project our fears and our insecurities. It is always easy to blame our pain and confusion on others: those darn Democrats or Republicans. But I am here to tell you that we have more in common than you think. We have a common identity. We are baptized, which means we all have been adopted as sons and daughters of God. Regardless of party and regardless of color of skin or economic position, we are children of God. This is our identity.

We also have a common mission: to build the kingdom of God. We are so busy fighting against each other that we forget we are builders first. Let us get back to building! This is who we are. I encourage you to think about your baptism and give thanks to God for his benevolent election. May he continue to bless you. Amen!