

Sermon for January 12, 2020

1st Sunday After the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord

Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Aptos, CA

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Yesterday, the Church of God ordained a new bishop, who will serve us here in the Episcopal Diocese of El Camino Real.

Ordination of a bishop is always a big deal – pomp and circumstance, “smells and bells,” etc, etc.

But notice what Lucinda was wearing – just an alb.

Symbol of baptism. Universal, applies to ALL of us in the church, not something special and different.

[Sidebar: Malcom X, hajj, white garments. What if we all wore albs to church every Sunday?]

Why does the person being ordained start out in an alb, even if they are already a deacon or priest? Because **all ministry has its origins in our baptism.**

Ordination is a setting apart for a particular KIND of ministry in the church, but **the call to ministry comes through baptism, just as it did for Jesus.**

Jesus's baptism = start of his public ministry, commissioning him for work in God's name. Baptism does the same for us.

We may not literally be the son (or daughter) of God, but when we are baptized, God claims us as his child. "You are my child, the beloved, with you I am well-pleased."

We are strengthened by this connection to God. Knowing that we are beloved and accepted in God's eyes, we can have the "strength and courage" to do whatever scary thing he may be calling us to do.

Lay ministry IS NOT primarily about what lay people do INSIDE the church but, OUTSIDE of it. "Lay ministry" is not primarily about serving as an acolyte or chalice bearer. It's about serving as a nurse, or a teacher, or a lawyer, or if not the specific job, in how you do that job.

Every time someone is baptized in the church, it's just as big of a deal as when a bishop is ordained!

For baptisms, we do a pretty good job with making the day special and different from other days – there's the water bath, for one thing, and the giving of a candle to symbolize your light shining forth in the world. It's certainly not "church as usual" on that day.

But we don't do as good of a job of acknowledging the specific things God is calling each person to do when they are baptized.

When Lucinda was ordained yesterday, she was presented with gifts that symbolize her ministry – a crozier, a mitre, a pectoral cross. **What if every lay person were presented with symbols of their ministry when they were baptized?**

It's nearly impossible to do this if you're baptizing an infant, but if you're baptizing an adult or even a child who is old enough to have made this choice for himself and have some idea of what his gifts are and what God may be calling him to do, it could be done!

Robbie – healyour societies. White coat, stethoscope, nutrition triangle, running shoes?

Brody – game warden. Camouflage shirt and a badge or uniform.

Because even if they didn't live stream the service to many different locations when you were baptized, in God's eyes, **what happened that day is exactly the same as what happened for Lucinda yesterday – you were commissioned to follow God, claiming and owning the gifts he has given you to share the good news of God's love and the power of the Resurrection with the world.**

Since many of us did not have that experience of our baptism, allow me to give you the gift of going back there and seeing it from that perspective, through a guided meditation.

If you would, please close your eyes and sit in a comfortable position. Try to let go of all extraneous thoughts and be present in the moment. Take a few breaths here now, just noticing your breath as it flows in and out.

In both Hebrew and in Greek, the word for “spirit” and the word for “breath” are identical. As you notice your breath, let it remind you of the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Breath, within, the breath that gives not only physical life, but spiritual life.

Now picture yourself at your baptism, whether that was as a baby, or a small child, or an adult. If you were old enough to remember your baptism when it happened, bring up those memories now. If you were too young to remember it, visualize yourself as a baby being brought to the font.

As you picture the water being poured over you or being immersed in the water, visualize the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descending on you, just as it did on Jesus at his baptism.

Picture the dove coming down from heaven, and as it comes close to your head, it changes form, into an immense ball of light that enters your head and flows throughout your entire body, bathing you in rich, warm light.

Now hear the words of God to you: “This is my child, the beloved, with you I am well-pleased.” Sit for a moment with the awareness that that spirit, which has entered you, continues to live within you.

Now see yourself standing before the baptismal font, still dripping with the water that has washed you clean. As you stand there, you glow with the warmth of the Spirit within. Someone comes up to you and wraps you in a white alb.

Then, as you stand there, a whole parade of people come before you, one at a time, bringing gifts that symbolize your gifts and your call to ministry.

If you have a call to healing, they might be bringing you a soothing balm or a pack of gauze. If you have a call to evangelism, they might be bringing you a net so that you can go out and “fish for people.” If you have a call to prophecy, they might be bringing you protest signs for your next public demonstration for justice.

Take a moment to reflect on your gifts and your call, and look and see what things God’s people are bringing to give to you. As you see them, notice what your reaction is to each item.

Now, take a step back and look at all the objects set before you and before the altar that symbolize your gifts and God’s call to you. Now imagine lying face down on the floor in full prostration, as Bishop Lucinda did yesterday during the prayers before she was ordained.

And now, hear the prayer of self-dedication from the Book of Common Prayer – you may say it with me if you know the words:

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray you, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. (BCP 832-833)