**First Sunday After Epiphany, Baptism of Our Lord 1/7/2024**

**Gen. 1:1-5, Ps 29, Acts 19:1-7, Mk. 1:4-11 Eliza Linley**

The readings we’ve heard this morning, at the beginning of our new calendar year, are all about new beginnings, transformations, new ways of thinking. In Genesis we read about the very dawn of creation, an ancient story written down some 2,500 years ago that dovetails rather nicely with our current understanding of how the worlds began. The psalm, even more ancient, is also stunningly on point, as the voice of God thunders over the waters and winter storms lash our coastline: we, as well as the coast, are being transformed. These winter king tides and floods are themselves a baptism of repentance for the ways we have overheated the earth, and may they lead us to a better way of co-existing with the gift of God that is our home.

In the Book of Acts, Paul travels to the interior of Asia Minor, to a place where they’ve never heard of the Holy Spirit. He baptizes them in the name of Jesus, a new concept in itself, and no sooner has he done that than the Holy Spirit descends upon them, just as it did at Jesus’ own baptism, causing them to speak in tongues and prophesy. And so this triple-barreled baptism has come down to us today, cementing it in the form of the Trinity. Our baptismal Covenant, which we will soon hear, says that in baptism we, like those early disciples, are “reborn by the Holy Spirit, and sealed as Christ’s own forever.” And now the ministry of John, our patron saint, is finished. As he said, “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. John’s job is done, and he hands it over to his cousin. We no longer need the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. The Lord is here. We don’t have any confusion about who is and isn’t the Messiah.

John emphasized the need for repentance, but Jesus proclaims, over and over again, the new order: the Kingdom of God has drawn near us; it is no longer far off, no longer coming, but HERE. As he said in the Temple when he was 12, TODAY, in your very hearing, this prophecy has been fulfilled: Today this text has become true, that he has been anointed, that he’s been sent to proclaim good news to the poor.

It's as though Jesus himself has been changed by his baptism. The heavens open and a voice from heaven proclaims him as the Son of the Most High, and Jesus is no longer just the carpenter’s clever son, or a refugee in Egypt, or just another prophet. He has been changed into someone who will preach, and heal the sick, and make the dead live again. He will astound and mystify people with his teaching, and confound us, even today, with his death on a cross for the life of all of us. He seems to have become a completely different person.

It's as though the waters of baptism have washed away what was hiding his true self, somehow given him the power and agency to become who he truly is, the inspiration to begin a ministry that will change the world. And so it is with us, too. Of course, none of us is Jesus. BUT each and every one of us is a beloved child of God. And each of us, whether we recognized it or not, was transformed by our baptism. And each of us continues to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, in our several ministries, as long as we live. In effect, we’re commissioned to live baptismally. What does that mean?

* It means knowing we’ve been changed forever because God is working in our life.
* That our true self is revealed by being washed clean of the smudges and grime – the sin - that stood between us and God.
* That we’ve been grafted into an enormous and loving family, the Body of Christ, the Church.
* And that we’ve been given an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in all God’s works.

Wow! What a gift! And what an awesome responsibility. We, too, are changed. No longer just ordinary people in the world, but people who:

* Boldly confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, however we do that,
* Strive for justice and peace among all people, and
* Seek and serve Jesus in everyone we meet.

But along with this we get to have a different kind of life:

* A life of gratitude in the face of both success and failure
* A life of forgiveness, even when it’s hard
* A life of repentance, no matter how often we make mistakes
* And a life forever changed: that moves from brokenness to wholeness, and from death into life.

Today, right after this sermon, we, together, will baptize Isaac and Lizzie Bellik. Isaac, whose name means “son of laughter”, after Sarah, the mother of the first Isaac, who laughed when told, in her old age, that she would become a mother, and Lizzie, whose ancient name, like my own, means “beloved of God”. They have prepared, pretty extensively, for this moment. We have met, and talked about it, what it means to them. Their parents have chosen sponsors, or godparents, who will join with Ozan and Jenny in guiding these two in their life in Christ, and they are ready.

It is now for us, with them, to share in Jesus’ eternal priesthood, to rejoice in our adoption as beloved children of God, and to give thanks that we are all part of an amazing and ancient community of transformation. Through baptism, we are forgiven, loved, and freed to become more fully who God has created us to be. In baptism, God looks at all of us and says, “This is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased.” In baptism, Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled: “arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you”. *Amen. Let’s do it!*

*I am indebted to the words of the Baptismal Covenant, and also to Barrie Bates, onetime CDSP colleague, from his sermon at the Baptism of Our Lord, 2017.*