

Baptism of the Lord – B
Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Mark 1:4-11

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
Wimberley UMC
Notes not for publication
January 11, 2009

I read this week the opinion that one of the tragedies of the modern church is our production of Christians who think they've got God right here, conveniently tucked away in their breast pocket. We've come to know and treasure the persons of the Holy Trinity: God, our ultimate cruise director, concerned with satisfying our every desire; Jesus, the divine good luck charm who wards off trouble; and the Holy Spirit, a nice, soothing dose of Demeral. God is all about us for far too many Christians, especially those in affluent places, we who have so many ways of insulating ourselves from suffering. From that perspective, the act of baptism which we will celebrate and remember today is a sweet party we mainline Christians throw for babies and invite God to show up, along with other admirers. Even churches that practice adult baptism can paint baptism as something we do, under our control, the way we decide to be a buddy of Jesus.

This, of course, is neither the act of baptism nor the God we actually encounter in scripture. Our first clue is John the Baptist himself, God's baptizing representative in the gospels. His presence alone makes it clear that this is not going to be a placid experience. If we take our gospel reading from Mark this morning and actually back it up a couple of verses, we see that Mark begins "the good news of Jesus Christ" with the words of the prophet Isaiah, where a voice cries out in the wilderness, the wild place, 'Prepare the way of the Lord...' (v. 3). Then, connecting that old prophetic word

with the current gospel, Mark says John “appeared in the wilderness.” John is dressed like a prophet and eats like a prophet and confronts people like a prophet, coming from an untamed place. And his voice calls for repentance, for change, challenging the people who encountered him. He baptized people who went out to him at the river Jordan and confessed their sins. And he is the one who baptizes Jesus.

The raw, unruly nature of the Baptizer in the wilderness is our first clue that baptism is not a quaint ritual to celebrate how sweet babies are or how much we love Jesus. Baptism comes from outside us, outside our control. And our second clue comes as we follow along in the story—Jesus steps into the water, as even he comes with the others to humble himself to baptism, and we hear the voice of God. Can you imagine such a thing? The voice of God? Today’s Psalm 29 describes the voice of God as earthshaking, literally. It thunders over the waters, breaks the cedars, “flashes... flames of fire. The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; ...[it] causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare” (vv. 8-9). Our first reading from Genesis reminds us that it was by this voice that the earth and light and all things are not just shaken, but have come to exist in the first place. This voice is power that is completely not us, that is so much more than we are, that calls a new thing into being where there was nothing.

So what does the voice say? The way we’ve built this up, it could have looked like a scene from the throne room of the Wizard of Oz—“Who dares approach the Son of God?” the voice might have thundered. “Who will look upon his baptism? Grovel, O people of sin, or better yet, run away, and hide your miserable selves.” But no, the

unfathomable, unmanageable, uncontrollable God of the universe sends down the Spirit, soft like a dove, and says to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (1:11). The word toward Jesus at his baptism is one of love and tenderness, intimacy, and the bold Christian promise ever since has been that God's voice speaks the same to us. The contrast is extreme, though we might not always see it that way, and we certainly might not see it happening in the way we practice baptism. But two opposing poles of the nature of God are bound together in this ritual—on one end, the enormity of God's transcendence, above and apart from the material world and anything we could hope to know; and on the other end, the intimate closeness of God, loving and knowing and claiming us as precious. Some would call this paradox; others call it mystery.

Water is a wonderful symbol and medium for this polarity. Every time we celebrate baptism, we pray a prayer called the Thanksgiving over the Water. This prayer recalls all the ways God has used water to save and redeem God's people. From the waters of chaos before the earth took form and the walls of water parted at the Red Sea, to the water that keeps our bodies alive and cushioned us in our mother's bodies before we were even born—water is power and energy, and water is life. And when we touch it, when we feel it flow upon our skin, it can be for the baptized a tangible reminder of what God has done and who God has been. As part of our reaffirmation ritual in a few moments, you will hear the words, "Remember your baptism, and rejoice." One of my professors in seminary used to encourage the kids in his church to think of their baptism every time they got in the tub or shower or went swimming,

whenever they felt the water hit their body. This is a true sacrament—a spiritual reality that we cannot fully grasp, made present to us through such an immediate, physical element, wherever we may find ourselves.

I said at the beginning that baptism is not a way of celebrating that we've got God in our breast pocket. But it may be a way of celebrating that God's got us. Those of you who have taken the Newcomers Class have heard me say that baptism is not something we do; it's something God does. That's why we don't re-baptize people; God doesn't need do-overs. God extends a covenant to us, and we live our lives tying to respond. That's what our recommitment symbolizes today, our response to what God has done. We will spend our whole lives growing into the knowledge that God's creative power, the life that pulses at the heart of the universe itself, is concerned with us. So the voice of God at the baptismal font indeed becomes an affirming word for us, but nothing like the glib assumptions we can so easily make about our own importance. Our lives hold profound, intrinsic value, but we cannot come to that knowledge just by making it up. We find ourselves and our worth, the meaning of our lives, when we find ourselves in God.

There's a story about that kind of recognition, about the kind of connection or relationship that is affirmation at the very deepest level. It's from a book by Rachel Remen, called *Kitchen Table Wisdom*. She writes:

("To Be Seen By the Heart," pp. 149-150)

Being seen, being known, being loved by the One whom we cannot fathom or contain tells us who we are; it reveals to us the relationship that gives us life and that gives our life direction and purpose. So come to the water today, beloved of God, and listen for God's voice claiming your life.

Announce: We will be celebrating today a reaffirmation of God's covenant with us in baptism. If you have been baptized, no matter how old you were when it happened, you are invited to come and touch the water and to give thanks for God's grace in your life. If you have not been baptized, you are still welcome to come to the water, for God's grace is a free gift at work in all of us. If you are interested in exploring being baptized, please let either Rip or me know.

Jacklyn Belle Degenhart joined us Monday the 5th at 4:06 PM. She weighed 8 lbs. 7 oz. and was 21 inches long and has a full head of hair.