

**The First Sunday after the Epiphany
The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ
Holy Comforter Church
January 10, 2010
The Rev. John E. Shields**

How many of you remember your baptism?

I do. It took place at Temple Baptist on East Twenty Fifth Street in Winston-Salem. I was twelve years old.

Now that was a long time ago. But I do remember it. Mostly because the person in front of me was an old man --- probably a little older than I am today. He came up out of the water shouting “Hallelujah!” That sure got my attention; you see this was baptism by immersion --- yep, went all the way under.

In any event, some of us remember our baptisms; some of us were too young when we were baptized to remember.

When I was baptized, I had said that I believed that Jesus Christ was my Savior and Lord. I had little idea what that meant, I wanted something, I wasn't sure what. I know that my parents were pleased. I know that I was a different person then. But you know, that is OK

When you were baptized, you may or may not remember, and even if you do, no doubt you are different today than you were then. And that's OK too.

Today, the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we commemorate the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. This is an inaugural event in the life of Jesus. After this, Jesus begins His ministry.

Because it is the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, we set aside this day as one appropriate for baptisms and appropriate for recalling our own baptism and what it means in our life.

Baptism is a seminal event in our life, just as in Jesus'. It marks us (as it says in the service) as Christ's own forever. It marks the beginning of our ministry even though we might be so young that we haven't a clue.

Do you remember the movie Green Card? It was released in 1990. It always reminded me of baptism.

Did any of you see it?

This movie stars --- Gerard Depardieu and Andie McDowell.

The setting is New York City.

In the story, Andie McDowell lives in a rent-controlled apartment that requires occupancy by a couple.

Depardieu plays a French immigrant who needs to be married in order to remain in the United States and obtain a Green Card --- this allows him the right to work in the US.

Someone who knows their predicament brings the two together. They make a deal. They will be married for convenience so both can meet their needs. (They do not like each other at all.)

Well, you can imagine what happens. The immigration officials are investigating Depardieu. Because of this each one of the couple is to be interrogated. They must learn about each other in order to prove the marriage is not just one of convenience.

Of course, you know what happens. Their scheme is discovered and he is to be deported. But by being together, by learning of each other, they develop genuine affection for one another. They fall in love.

I think that Baptism is like that.

We may well enter into it without a clue. Our motives, if we even had any, may have been unclear. We may have been infants. BUT the relationship with the Lord grows because we come to know him as we live and move and have our being with His people and in His church.

Baptism is about relationships --- with God --- with God's people and with all people in God's creation.

It sets the context of who we are and whom we may become.

In Baptism, we form a covenant with God. In this covenant we become children of God and are given God's Holy Spirit. We are also made full members of the Body of Christ --- there are no second class citizens in this body.

As for our part of the covenant --- we agree to renounce evil, turn to Christ and accept him as Lord and follow him. We also make certain promises. If you ever wonder what a job description for a Christian might look like --- this is it.

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving you neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

These are the promises of our baptism, and isn't it interesting that the newly baptized doesn't say these by herself?

NO, we all say them.

We renew our own baptismal covenant every time there is a baptism.

Why?

To remind ourselves that this is an ongoing process --- It is a relationship. And relationships change-- just as we have changed since our baptism.

We are reminded too that we cannot live these promises by our own devices, -- that is why we say ---- "With God's Help!.."

Left to our own devices -----

We are sometimes like the fellow in this story:

Two friends meet on the street. One has bandages on both ears. The other says, "What happened?"

The bandaged one says, "It was my wife's fault. You see the phone rang, and I didn't know that her iron was plugged in and hot. I picked it up and burned my ear."

The other fellow then says. “Yes, but what about the other ear?”

“The darn fool called back!”

Left to our own devices, we do not learn from our mistakes.

Left to our own devices, we become convinced that we are in charge, that life is ours for the taking and that people are put in our path to either serve us or to obstruct us.

Left to our own devices we will fall short of our baptismal promises -- we will miss the mark.

When we join with the community of faith, we are less prone to the distortions of individualism.

Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

When we continue in the “breaking of bread and in the prayers”, we are developing that relationship with each other and with our Lord, which will feed and sustain us.

Today as we enter our Annual Giving Campaign, this baptismal promise stands out.

Continuing in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship simply translates into being an active member of the community of faith. And that very simply means being in and with the community and supporting it by our presence, prayers and pledges – or put another way: our time, talent and treasure. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

When we are fed and supported in our life in Christ, we are empowered to rise to the challenge of loving our neighbor --- and not just those who look like us, but we are to look for Christ in ALL persons.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Sustained as we are in this community of love and support, we are supported as we strive for justice and root out the sins of racism and sexism and all the other isms that keep people from being fully human as God intended.

Whether it is refusing to tell racial jokes, or refusing to belong to racially exclusive organizations, or supporting causes that correct injustice, or working and praying for peace --- we are supported in those endeavors by the community of faith and by the relationship with our Lord that has come from living within the covenant established in baptism.

Today, we may or may not remember our own baptismal day, but let us remember and celebrate and renew that relationship with God in Christ which is ours by virtue of our dying and rising with him in the waters of baptism and by our renewal of those vows that have marked us as Christ's own forever!

Remember I said earlier that no doubt we are not the same people that we were when we were baptized – we have changed. I also said that is OK – here's why – the one in whom we are baptized – the one whose mark we carry on our foreheads --- he has not changed – nor will he. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.” Hebrews 13:8.

You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever!