

The First Sunday after Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ
January 8, 2017
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

It's usually a bit of a shock for me this time of year. The first signs of Christmas always come too early. The first Christmas displays I see generally pop up in Costco – sometime in September. And as soon as the Halloween candy comes off the shelves, the void is filled up with Christmas. And it snowballs from there!

Until suddenly it vanishes. Packed up. Stowed away. Out of sight. Out of mind.

It's not just the stores. The same thing happens at my house. When I left home on Friday morning, it was still Christmas. By the time I got home Friday afternoon, Barb had undecorated the Christmas tree. The decorations were boxed up. The tree was at the curb. Christmas was gone.

It's usually the same here, as well. By this time in the year, the shepherds have returned to their fields and the Magi have come and gone home again – albeit “by another way.” And, as a sign of all this, the garlands and greens and poinsettias have typically been removed.

But, as you'll have seen, we've softened the shock of it quite a bit this year. The Holy Family still huddle within our crèche. The shepherds are still around here somewhere. The Magi finally arrived and now they've begun their journey home, by way of Brooks Hall for our Epiphany potluck later today. Garlands and greens – and even a few poinsettias – adorn our church. At the 10:15 service, one of the hymns we'll sing is all about Jesus' baptism, but the tune is actually a 15th century Christmas carol. In all these ways, we see and hear echoes of Christmas.

By rights, it shouldn't be. Last Sunday, we who gathered here heard how, eight days after the birth of Jesus, he was circumcised and given a name. But that was then. This Sunday, Jesus is all grown up and being baptized in the River Jordan.

But, for all that, I hear echoes of Christmas still – especially given the way Matthew tells us about the day Jesus comes to the River Jordan to be baptized by John. We always hear the story of Jesus' baptism on the Sunday after the Epiphany, but Matthew tells it a bit differently than the others; and (in that telling) Jesus' adult baptism is filled with the same good news of Christmas.

The conversation between this adult Jesus and John is unique to Matthew's account. It's only here that we hear of John's unwillingness to baptize Jesus. John says it seems wrong for him to baptize Jesus. He wants to keep Jesus out of the muddy, murky water there. John says that he should be baptized by Jesus, not the other way around. The point, it seems, is that, at least so far as John is concerned, Jesus shouldn't stoop so low.

It's the "First Temptation" of Jesus, not unlike the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness. It's the recurring temptation posed by the disciples. It's the temptation to take his place on a pedestal or a throne, to assume the lofty position of honor, to stay safe and dry.

And because we hear of John's reluctance, we also hear of Jesus' resolve:

Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.

Jesus rejects the temptation offered by John. And so, after their brief debate, John relents and baptized Jesus like anyone and everyone else.

Jesus says it's necessary in order to "fulfill all righteousness." The phrase is a vexing one, the meaning not immediately self-evident. I think it might be enough to say that Jesus is trying to say he needed to be baptized simply because it was the right thing for him to do. Rather than remain aloof and set apart, he needed to get wet. As one commentator describes the significance of it all:

[Jesus] allied himself with ... all the broken and hurting people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside us and among us. Not long into his public mission, the sanctimonious religious leaders derided Jesus as a "friend of gluttons and sinners." They were surely right about that.

With his baptism Jesus openly and decisively declared that he stands shoulder to shoulder with me in my fears and anxieties. He intentionally takes sides with [us in our] neediness, and declares that God is biased in [our] favor ... ⁱ

It sounds like Christmas to me. It sounds like the night that Joseph dreamed an angel came to him to tell him about the child that would be born to him and his betrothed, Mary:

*'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'*

Precisely in the moment when Jesus comes up out of the waters of his baptism, a voice says ...

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

On Christmas Eve, we heard of angels coming to lowly shepherds with the good news of great joy that they would find the Lord, the Messiah, in none other than a "a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." At Jesus' baptism, a Voice proclaims the glad tidings that this same child, now grown and dripping wet, is the very same.

And it's the timing of it all that speaks to me of Christmas. The announcement of God's good favor towards Jesus comes at this seemingly inauspicious moment. Jesus hasn't done anything yet to display his unique identity or relationship to God. He hasn't performed a miracle. He hasn't disclosed any deep and abiding wisdom. All he's done is get wet. All he's done is wade deeply into the waters of humanity.

Wading into the waters of humanity is what makes the echo of Christmas, of “Emmanuel ... God-with-us.” And the voice’s proclamation of Jesus as God’s beloved in this very moment is what tells us all that what goes on in this muddy, mucked up world matters profoundly to God.

Just before Christmas this past year, Celine Burke shared a Christmas letter from the Bishop of Western Michigan. I quoted a little of it in the January newsletter. The bishop tells a story of a muddy world and of incarnation.

A swastika was rudely spray painted on the back wall of St. James Church, Albion soon after our recent national election. It greatly frightened the congregation. This hateful act desecrated one of our sacred spaces causing considerable pain and grief amongst the loving, generous people of St. James, who actively serve their community. They felt vulnerable and alone, and are still struggling with fear and anger, feeling violated and attacked ...

The news of this violation reached the good people of Trinity Church, Marshall. They heard the cries of their brothers and sisters. Their response was not some empty obligation of thoughts and prayers. No, they responded by sending a delegation to attend the next Sunday service at St. James.

Quite simply, Trinity Church showed up. They stood with their hurting friends. They prayed with them, worshipped with them, and stood among them ... When we show up, the lonely are no longer alone. When we stand with the vulnerable, they are protected and have help carrying the burden. When we enter into another’s struggle, that which is desecrated is re-consecrated, and the whole ugly scene is reclaimed, restored, redeemed.

This is as beautiful and hopeful a Christmas story as I have ever heard. We may find ourselves and our world awash in grief and fear. We may find ourselves isolated and vulnerable and alone. We may feel hopeless and lost, violated or oppressed. And then someone comes and stands with us. Or holds us. Or listens to us, and the darkness doesn't feel so dark. It's like a holy light illuminating a deep darkness ...

This is what the incarnation is all about - Emmanuel, *God with us*. At Christmas, the one Holy God comes to us, dwells among us, stands with us, and in so doing, transforms our often ugly and dangerous world into a more loving and peaceful, gracious and holy place. *God with us* redeems hatefulness. *God with us* restores the profane. *God with us* makes the world livable and gives us the way to live peaceably with each other. This is why Christmas is so holy and blessed.

The bishop ended the letter, saying that the “perfect Christmas gift” would be for us to do the same. To put it another way, especially if we feel the shock of Christmas being so suddenly gone, we can keep the echoes of Christmas reverberating in our world, by showing up for one another and being a “holy light” in the darkness.

ⁱ Dan Clendenin @ <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20080107II.shtml>.