

2026 1st after Epiphany: Baptism of Our Lord

I think I said this at the time, but I really resent that the attack on the Capitol building five years ago was perpetrated on January 6. At the time I remember growling, “No, you can’t do this to January 6th. January 6th is Epiphany and it is *OURS*.”

It makes me angry that a date which for me has always represented light and joy and the expansiveness of God’s love for all people is now, in most people’s minds, a day of darkness and violence and hatred.

It doesn’t make it any easier to have a week like this one, when we can’t process one act of ugliness and lawlessness before another pushes in.

It can feel like the darkness is winning. We quote that beautiful line from John’s Gospel, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” —but sometimes it seems like that light is a very small, flickering flame very far away. We can see it, and it gives us hope—but visibility where we stand is still quite poor. We still bump into walls and trip over things we can’t see.

It feels like the darkness has the upper hand.

So I don't know that I've ever been so grateful for the first Sunday *after* Epiphany, when we hear together the story of Jesus' baptism, and renew our baptismal covenant.

Jesus went to the River Jordan along with all the other people in that region. People who were oppressed. Discouraged. Powerless in the face of the Empire that daily ground them down. People who had a hard time seeing any light.

People who would cling to any scrap of hope they could find.

I know, I know. In today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, there is no mention of other people. After all our work during Advent to teach the Chapel Kids to separate the threads of Matthew and Luke and look at each one separately, I'm weaving in details from Mark and Luke's versions of this story.

But indulge me. It's been a rough week for preachers.

Right now, I need that image of the Son of God standing in the midst of all the other people there. I need him to be Emmanuel, God-with-Us. I need that immediacy of him being the light in the darkness for the other people there.

Soon enough he will go off alone, into the wilderness where he is tempted to let someone other than God tell him who he is. (Even if we don't hear that story until the first Sunday in Lent.)

For today, I need him to have people around him as he hears those amazing words, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

God is well pleased with Jesus *before* he does anything amazing. Before he teaches or heals or exorcises demons. God is declaring that Jesus' belovedness is not dependent on what he accomplishes.

We are in the Gospel of Matthew, which has some of the most important ethical teaching in the New Testament. In the next few weeks we'll get a little taste of the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God is made clear. Then waaaay on the other end of this liturgical year we will hear the parable of the sheep and the goats, in which Jesus says clearly that we recognize citizens of the kingdom of heaven by how they treat each other.

What we do matters.

When John challenges him about the need for baptism—because remember, John's baptism was one of

repentance—Jesus says it’s “proper” for them to this, “to fulfill all righteousness.”

But what does *that* mean, Jesus?

In my studies this week, I came across an interesting and helpful description of what righteousness means. The scholar said that righteousness is not about keeping the rules. It’s about our “disposition” toward God.

That made me laugh, as I acknowledged my “disposition” had been pretty lousy all week, and I knew I needed an attitude adjustment. But as I sat with that, I thought about that singing exercise I made you do in Advent. (Don’t worry, I’m not going to make you do it again.) Part of what I was trying to get you all to feel that day was resonance. That amplification of sound that happens when two separate voices are attuned to each other. As I shared this image on Wednesday, Jim pointed out that when you have two tuning forks perfectly in tune, when you sound one, the other will begin to ring out as well.

That’s what righteousness is. It’s being in tune, so that when the Holy Spirit calls out to us, our souls begin to ring in response, and we are empowered to act for the good of all God’s children. To mix my metaphors, we realize our own flame isn’t quite as weak as we thought.

In a few minutes we will renew our baptismal covenant. We do this several times a year, but I can't think of a time when it seemed more crucial than it does right now, to remind ourselves of the promises we have made to seek to resonate with the Kingdom's tone.

Instead of allowing fear to drive us into lonely, dark silos, we commit to gathering with others in prayer, worship and fellowship.

Instead of giving in to the divisive powers of darkness and then being consumed by guilt and trying to hide our shame, we commit to telling the truth about our failures, and then opening ourselves to the power of God's Spirit to restore us to communion with God and each other.

Instead of proclaiming all the ways the darkness seems to be winning, we commit ourselves to sharing the *Good News* of God in Jesus Christ, which says that not even violence, hatred and death can defeat God's love for us.

Instead of falling into the world's pattern of divisiveness, we refuse to sort people into 'us and them' categories, and instead look for Christ in *every* person we encounter. (Even when we have to dig really deep to see even a glimpse of that divine light!)

Instead of throwing our hands in the air and conceding defeat, we continue to strive for justice and peace, by respecting each person's dignity, even and especially when they have betrayed it in themselves. Some of the most important work we can do is helping people find that part of them that can still resonate with God's kingdom values.

And finally, instead of treating this world as something to be consumed and thrown away, we commit to protecting and celebrating the beauty of God's creation. We commit ourselves to being good stewards of creation, for the benefit of those who come after us. What an incredible testament to our hope—that we believe there will be future generations to celebrate the goodness of creation.

And we remind ourselves over and over again that we can't do this ourselves. We need God's help. We need God to continue to sound the tuning fork so that we can find our note.

As we discussed this passage in Bible Study this week, I was moved by one participant's emotion as she told about looking at her newborn son and having that feeling, "This is my beloved son." I know on one level she was remembering the joy and awe she felt as a parent, but at another level it was sinking in that *she* is that beloved child in whom God delights.

We need that, right now, too. We need to remember that all of those promises we make in baptism are not in order to make God love us. They are our response to discovering that we are *already* loved.

So I am going to tell you one last story, and then give you some homework.

Years ago, a friend of mine was going through a really dark phase in her life. She felt worthless and powerless and wondered what good she could possibly do. Her spiritual director told her to write out (or print out) the words ‘BEHOLD, A BELOVED CHILD OF GOD’ and tape it to her bathroom mirror at a level that she would see it over her head every time she washed her face or brushed her teeth or combed her hair. Every time she saw her face, she would be reminded to whom she belonged.

So that’s part one of your homework.

Part two is to also print off the baptismal covenant, and tape it to the door of your fridge or a kitchen cupboard. Not as a reminder of what you *should* be doing, but instead as an answer to what you *can* do. When the world feels overwhelming and you begin to feel a sense of despair that you are powerless to do anything, read it through. Find one thing that doesn’t feel like it’s too big,

and then do it. It won't always be organizing a public protest against the evils being done in our name; sometimes it will be to stop and say a quiet prayer for someone you know is struggling.

It will remind you that you are not alone. We are not alone. Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, right here beside us. And where he is, there is light that the darkness cannot overcome.

Amen.