

Baptism of our Lord/Epiphany 1B
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Good Shepherd Episcopal Church
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Christmas day a few years ago, the kids and I were flying out of Richmond to Florida to see my parents for the holidays. We were standing in line in security when Keira turned to me and said, “Daddy, what do you call it when you feel like you’ve been somewhere before?” “You mean, déjà vu?” “Yes, that’s it! I feel like déjà vu right now.” “That’s not déjà vu, sweetie. This place looks familiar because you have been here before...last Christmas. We flew out of this same airport to see your grandparents a year ago.” “Oh.”

If you’ve gotten a sense of déjà vu hearing this morning’s gospel lesson, there’s good reason. Like Keira at the Richmond airport, we’ve been here before. And not very long ago either. Just a few weeks ago, the second Sunday of Advent, we read these same verses in Mark’s gospel about John the Baptist. In the time since then, Christmas has come, the baby Jesus has arrived, the presents have been opened, the Magi have come and gone as well. Yet, despite all that has happened in the church, here we are again, with John the Baptist. You may have figured you’ve done your time with the wild man in the desert already. We had two Sundays of him in fact. Isn’t that enough? We just can’t seem to get away from him.

But like the Richmond airport, we’re not spending a lot of time here, we’re just passing through. The main point of our reading this morning isn’t John, but rather the few verses that are new, the ones that have been tacked onto the earlier bit about John, the verses about Jesus’ baptism. You see, today is the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, when we commemorate Jesus’ baptism by John in the River Jordan. Each year, when this feast comes around, we read the story of this event in whatever gospel we are reading that year—in this case, Mark’s Gospel. But the thing is, Mark’s account of Jesus’ baptism is so brief that if we just read the verses that describe the baptism alone, the lesson would only be 2 or 3 verses long. It’d be just as long as the words I used to announce the reading itself. That’s the reason, I suppose, the designers of the lectionary, the schedule of Bible readings we use in worship, decided to add the preceding verses about John—in order to “beef up” the reading.

But I wonder if maybe there is not something else going in here, something more to the decision to include the verses we read a few weeks ago. Here’s what I’m thinking: You may not have realized this, but there is no account of Jesus’ nativity in Mark—no virgin birth, no angels, no shepherds, no star or manger, no wise men, no anything about Jesus before now, before his baptism. Everything we know about Jesus’ birth we know from Luke, with a bit from Matthew thrown in. Mark, by contrast, doesn’t seem to care too much about the baby Jesus. He’s too busy, too focused on telling us about Jesus the man, his mission and activities. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus just bursts onto the scene beside the Jordan, fully grown, ready to take on the powers of sin, death, and the devil that afflict the world. He’s come to John to kick that off by being baptized.

Now, even though we don’t know much about Jesus up to this point, his coming to John to be baptized is no less shocking here than it is in Matthew and Luke. Even if we didn’t know from Mark’s introduction, that Jesus is the Son of God, John the Baptist has tipped us off that there is

someone coming after him who is more powerful than he is, someone whose sandals he is not worthy to stoop to untie. So we're expecting a great and mighty warrior, a king, not this nobody who stands before him asking to be baptized. I mean, we're waiting for a hero, a superman to alight on the scene, not some scrawny carpenter's son. It makes even less sense, given what we know about Jesus—he's God's Son, the Incarnate Word, perfect God and perfect man, the sinless one—why then is he being baptized *for the forgiveness of sins*?! How could his sins be forgiven if he doesn't have any? It's like as if Jesus went to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and stands up and says, "Hello. I'm Jesus, and I'm an alcoholic." "But you're not!," you'd shout. "You're the Christ!" It doesn't make much sense. But Jesus does it anyway.

And, what's even stranger, he then receives immediate praise from God: just as Jesus is coming up out of the Jordan, the heavens open, the Holy Spirit alights on him like a dove, and he hears a voice from heaven say, "You are my Beloved Son; I am delighted with you." I don't know about you, but that whole scene leaves me confused. I mean, what was it that Jesus did that was so praiseworthy? What was God so proud of? His baptism, evidently, but why, it's not clear. The way Mark tells it, his baptism was a seminal event in Jesus' life. This is where it all begins, the event that sets Jesus off for the rest of his career. So what is it about his baptism? Why did he do it? What does it tell us about Jesus?

In the other gospels, in Matthew and Luke, as I said, you have the infancy stories, and we know that from before he was born Jesus was special, that he was conceived by a virgin through the Holy Spirit, that he is God in the flesh, God come to be with us, to save us. We get all that before Jesus is even born in Matthew and Luke. But as I said, Mark has no story of Jesus' birth, no great "origin story"—just this baptism. Jesus doing something he shouldn't, or at least has no reason to be doing, being forgiven of sin. Jesus doesn't need to do that... *we do!* And maybe that's exactly Mark's point here. Jesus, the Son of God, has stepped out of heaven and come down to be with us, literally steps into the same muddy waters we are in, showing that there's no place he won't go, no depth, no messiness he won't immerse himself in order to be with us. And by the same token, there's no place, no depth, no hell we can go that Jesus hasn't himself gone. *This* is Mark's story of the Incarnation—God leaving behind his exalted throne, safe on dry land, to be with us in the muddy waters of our lives, to go into the muck with us, for us.

The British author CS Lewis poignantly compares what Jesus did in coming to earth to the actions of a deepsea diver:

One may think of a diver, [Lewis says] first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to colour and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. He and it are both coloured now that they have come up into the light: down below, where it lay colourless in the dark, he lost his colour, too.

In the Incarnation, Jesus descended in order to re-ascend. The same thing here, in his baptism: where Jesus descends, goes down into the water with sinful humanity, in order that when he comes up, he will bring humanity—*us*—up with him, cleansed, renewed, reborn. What Matthew

and Luke try to tell us with the story of Jesus' birth, Mark tells us in Jesus' baptism. It gives us Jesus' purpose, his mission in a nutshell—God humbles himself to go down into the muck to be with us, to bring us out of it.

In a time when the world seems to be getting messier, the truth ever murkier, our politics muckier and muckier, we can be forgiven for feeling déjà vu, for thinking that we are forever stuck in the same old world with the same old people and struggling with the same old demons as always, that whatever advances we may have made as a society, as a people, we are still subject to same base human motivations. That might be true, were it not for Christmas, for God's coming among us, as one of us. We may still be spending our days standing in the muck, but in Christ we are called to something different. God has gotten into the muddy waters with us, and pulled us out, towed us off and charged us to live a new life, a life of grace, a life lived under a new spirit, a new power, with a new focus and new promise, a promise that was given to us in our baptism in Christ, a promise that though it may seem like we are stuck in an endless groundhog's day of the worst of human prejudices and passions, we have been given another way, another way to live, a way of grace, truth, and life, of loving our neighbor and working together for the common good, respecting the dignity of all human beings. In Christ, we have been pulled out of the muck and called to something better. And that, we shall see, makes all the difference, not just in this moment but for eternity. Thanks be to God! Amen.