

Pastor Mollie's Sermon
January 12, 2020
Baptism of our Lord
Matthew 3:13-17/Year A

To Live among God's faithful people,
to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper,
to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,
to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,
and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?

These are the responsibilities given to your parents and grandparents on your baptism day!

I want to ask you....how often do you think about your baptism?

Perhaps your family reminded you of its importance by celebrating the anniversary of your baptism each year.

Or maybe you learned to appreciate it later, at confirmation or now as an adult.

Or maybe you know the theological significance of baptism but, truth be told, don't think of it all that often anyway.

(Don't worry, I'm not judging, just asking.)

I'm asking you to think about all this, of course, because today, the first Sunday after the start of Epiphany,

is the day on which we remember Jesus' own baptism.

And both the text from Mathew and the day itself offer an opportunity to think more deeply, and claim more fully, the promises God made to us at our own baptism.

In this great story of Jesus baptism there is a lot going on...

but there it one detail about Jesus' baptism that always strikes me and makes this event in Jesus' life, and in ours, an epiphany of grand proportions --

the opening of the heavens.

The heavens are opened!

We know that it means that which separates us from God is no longer;
that God is no longer up in the clouds, at a distance, but here among us.

We know all of this -- but do we believe it? Do we get it? Do we live it?

Sometimes we need a reminder that baptism is an epiphany kind of moment.

Epiphanies are not subtle.

Yes, we can look for God in all kinds of people and places, but sometimes God comes crashing through the clouds and stops you dead in your tracks.

Baptism should do the same.

In our tradition, we talk about the importance of our baptismal identity.

We talk about the importance of remembering our baptism daily, a daily dying and rising to Christ.

I'm all for that, but again, it's not enough to just say it.

So, this is where the heavens being opened really matters for me.

There is an intrusion here.

An inability of God to be separate from whom God loves, whether we like it or not.

We tend to define that as grace, the unmerited love of God,

but there is something about the radical image of God pulling apart the boundaries that we may have set up to protect ourselves from God getting too close..

Opening the heavens means
God is **choosing** to be with us.
God is **choosing** to be one of us.
God is **choosing** to make us God's own, and THAT should be its own epiphany.
We get to see the true character of God,
our God who would risk security and safety,
distance and determination,
so that God would know what it means to be among us.
A Luther seminary professor used to say, "We don't baptize children in case they die, but in case they live."
Baptism, from this sense, is not a once-and-done event but meant to shape and inform our whole lives.
But leaving that only to the parents, or only to confirmation, or only to the pastors seems foolish.
It's just too important.
The whole point of a congregation's life,
should be shaped to repeat,
remind, and reinforce the promises of Baptism and to invite all Christians not just to remember
but actively live out the love and acceptance of God we receive and hear about in Baptism.
And here, perhaps, is the connection to our own baptism and a reminder of why that event –
which most of us may not remember and perhaps have not often thought about –
matters so much.
Because each of us also longs to hear words of acceptance, identity, blessing, and commitment.
Which is precisely the gift of Baptism.
We do not have to do anything to receive God's promises.
Indeed, the beauty of infant Baptism is that you *can't* do anything
– not even make a decision for Jesus, let alone commit your life.
Rather, we are passive recipients of God's blessing and favor.
We are called God's beloved children not because of something we do but because of who God
is –
a loving parent who wants nothing more than to see us flourish.
In Baptism God just chooses us.
In Baptism, God says that we are enough.
That we are pleasing to God and deserve to be loved.
And that identity of being God's beloved child – precisely because it is established by God –
cannot be taken away from us.
There is, of course, a lot more we could say about baptism, and we often do,
but the baptism of Jesus suggests the first thing we should remember is that baptism is God's
epiphany.
Before we get too comfortable or complacent in claiming our baptismal identity, we would do
well to note its charge -- a charge to be an epiphany for others.
Our world needs more epiphanies -- and not just the ones to which we point, name, or describe --
but the epiphanies that we are willing to be.
What if living out your baptism in the world was committed to being just that?
To be the ones who opens the boundaries that try to keep God from whom God loves?
Think, for a moment, of all that will happen in the coming year –

the decisions that will be made, relationships started (or ended), careers changes, schools entered, illnesses endured, challenges overcome, risks taken, adventures dared, love shared.

So much will come down the pike in the coming weeks and months.

Some of it we may anticipate and be prepared for, but much of it we simply can't imagine.

Daunting.

Until we remember whose we are, and by doing that we can be comforted in knowing that God is with us through all of it.

God will not abandon us but will walk alongside us, strengthening us, encouraging us, granting us grace sufficient to become the people God wants us to be.

"You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased."

Powerful words.

Words that will shape and strengthen us throughout this new year.

They matter more than you might realize.

I want you to take out your candles you picked up before the service.

The ushers will be coming down the aisles and lighting the candles on the end of each pew, please light your neighbor's candle

At each of our baptisms, a candle was most likely lit, as a reminder that the Light of Christ shines in, around, and through us! That being named and claimed was God's promise to always be near.

Repeat after me:

Let my light shine, so all may see me, as God's beloved child, for which God is well pleased.

May this light help you feel the acceptance baptism conveys and to take with you the promise it offers.

May we enter into a fresh new year of grace, blessing, and light.

Amen.