

The First Sunday after the Epiphany, A, 2008
The Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

A prophet is the spokesman of God. There have been numerous prophets over the years, some with a valid claim to be speaking for God, most without such a valid claim. There was once a prophet named Isaiah, who is equally revered by Jew and Christian alike. Christians see, in Isaiah's prophecies, a foretelling of Jesus. Christians understand what we read from Isaiah this morning as speaking of Jesus. "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations."

I suspect that this prophecy was much on the mind of another prophet of God, John the Baptist, as Jesus came to John requesting baptism. In five short verses St. Matthew tells us about that baptism. First of all, there was an interesting disagreement between the Baptizer and the Lord. John recognized Jesus as the Messiah and he did not feel worthy to baptize Jesus. There is also the always-unanswered question of why would Jesus seek baptism, since John proclaimed his baptisms as a symbol of repentance from sin. The only answer we've ever had, or ever will have to this is the answer that Jesus gave John, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." There is nothing else about this that we can say. In any case, for Jesus, baptism was a beginning, an acceptance of the mission that God had given him, and the Lord would be true to that mission through out his life, his death and his resurrection. In baptism, Jesus accepted the mantle of messianic authority and responsibility, because he understood it as the will of his Father, God.

Matthew tells us something else that I, at least, find interesting. At the moment of his baptism, as he came up from immersion in the Jordan River's water, there was a theophany, an appearance of God to man, a manifestation of God in a way that you just cannot miss. They are rare, but really not all that rare. They even happen to people like you and me, from time to time. When they do, you know it; you know beyond any doubt that God has spoken to you. God knows how to get your attention when he wants to.

This theophany was different; it was visible, audible, and very, very present and focused. There was just no mistaking it. In Matthew's account you get the impression that the revelation was to Jesus, alone, at least the vision seemed to be. In other accounts of it, everybody present was aware. But as Matthew tells it, Jesus looked up into the heavens and saw the Spirit of God descending upon him, coming and alighting upon him, and he heard God's voice. The voice was not directed just to Jesus, though. Matthew's language makes this clear. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We should tie this back to Isaiah, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations."

The Spirit remained on Jesus throughout his earthly ministry. It is interesting that Matthew concludes his account of our Lord's earthly ministry with this comment from the very Roman soldiers that had crucified him, "Truly, this man was God's Son!"

Baptism, for Jesus, symbolized commitment to the Father's work. The Lord's work was redemptive work, totally, completely sacrificial in redeeming humanity from sin and death. It was also evangelical work, the work of knowing the Father and making him known. Our baptisms are more like Jesus' than we might think.

Yes, our baptisms differ in that there is that very necessary element of "washing clean," of setting sin aside. In that sense, our baptisms can be tied to those of John the Baptist. But, equally, our baptisms are very much rites of initiation and commitment. Our status changes in baptism. Before baptism, we were outside the body of Christ, the Church. With baptism, we are now insiders, members with all the responsibility of being a member of the Church of Christ, a disciple of the Lord, an instrument of God's work in this world. We are called in baptism to a new life of being a servant of God, doing the divine business of knowing Christ and making Christ known. This is our calling, this is our commission, because in baptism we are expected to die to self to the extent that we can live our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.

This best disciple is an imitator of the Master. Baptism intends to make us icons, images of Jesus Christ, so that we reflect Christ to others in this world. Some of us are better icons than others are, but none of us are anywhere near perfect. We don't have to be, and if we let the Holy Spirit coach us, we surely will be good enough. But being an imitator of Christ, being a disciple is our calling, our great commission. It is what being a Christian is all about. *Amen.*