

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Isaiah 43: 1 – 7

Psalm 29

Acts 8: 14 – 17

Luke 3: 15 – 17, 21 – 22

-----  
**“As the people were filled with expectation...”**

Depending upon whom you listen to, we are either mostly water or mostly stardust. And honestly, I don't know enough to know whether these are two irreconcilable propositions or two ways of saying the same thing. But either way, that means that we are made for the season of Epiphany, whose main symbols are the star and water.

This is the First Sunday after the Epiphany in our church calendar. On Wednesday, we celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany. Epiphany, from the Greek, means a showing or a revelation, and so the season of Epiphany has to do with all those ways in which Jesus shows forth or reveals God. The Feast of the Epiphany itself celebrates all the world, including us Gentiles, coming to the Christ child and worshipping him for who he is – the Son of God. In the Gospel of Matthew, the magi, who might be exotic kings from Persia, or perhaps Zoroastrian astrologers, or perhaps even just magicians or court fools, bring their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, symbolizing Christ's kingship, priesthood and death for us. It is that “star of wonder, star of might, star of royal beauty bright” which guides the magi to Jesus that becomes one of our symbols of the season.

The second revelation of God in Jesus is what we celebrate today: Jesus' baptism. And the third we get to hear about next week: Jesus' first miracle of turning water into wine at Cana in Galilee. Both of these events, of course, incorporate water, so it becomes our other main symbol of Epiphany.

In today's passage, Luke tells us that John comes to the Jordan offering a baptism of repentance. Now, baptism, a mikvah in Hebrew, or a ritual washing, is part of the process for converting from being a Gentile to being Jewish. But John's baptism, while perhaps based on this ritual, is different. John's baptism is not just for conversion, a baptism of adoption so to speak, it is a baptism with ethical implications for how one's life is lived afterwards. It is a baptism of empowerment. Those who receive this baptism are admonished to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” And so John is offering this baptism for all people: for the Gentiles who want to come to know God through the Jewish tradition and scriptures, and also for all those Jews who recognize that they have gone astray and need to turn around their lives. And so, we find the banks of the Jordan are chock full of sorry, guilty, faulty sinners waiting their turn to have John begin to change all that for them. Barbara Brown Taylor notes that if you have ever read the arrest record in the newspaper, then you've got a pretty good idea why most of them are there – loitering, pickpocketing, assault, grand-theft camel... You name it, they're there. Some of them are probably notorious, Taylor says. Others are crimes of the heart that are simply between them and God. But one and all, they pretty much know that they are not innocent. And so they come, brimming with expectation. And then Jesus shows up and joins the crowd.

What a surprise! What an embarrassment for the early church! Such an embarrassment that Luke can't even bring himself to say directly that Jesus is baptized by John. After all, why does a sinless Messiah who is the Son of God need a baptism of either adoption or repentance? Why should Jesus,

who is so much greater than John, subordinate himself and undergo this humbling ritual? Luke simply indicates that after Jesus is baptized, this revelation happens.

The other Gospels are equally circumspect. Mark, perhaps the earliest Gospel, has John acknowledging that he is “not even worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of the sandal of the one who is coming,” meaning, of course, Jesus. Matthew goes so far as to say, “John would have prevented him, saying ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” in which it is not too hard to hear the incredulity in John’s voice and question. The evangelist, John, doesn’t record the actual baptism, simply what John says before and after. And yet, in one way or another, all four evangelists preserve the tradition that Jesus is, in fact, baptized by John. Even if they don’t quite want to say it.

Perhaps the key lies in reframing Jesus’ baptism. So rather than seeing it as a baptism of adoption and repentance, perhaps we can see it as a baptism of affiliation and empowerment. Which is simply the other side of the coin. What if Jesus, like so many of the others, also comes to the banks of the Jordan filled with expectation? It’s worth noting that the first thing Jesus does post-baptism is to pray. Prayer will be a constant theme for Jesus’ ministry throughout the Gospel of Luke. It is in the middle of Jesus’ prayer, his conversation with God, that ‘something like a dove’ descends upon him, and a voice claims him, and anoints him with love. Luke doesn’t say whether all the others present see the ‘something like a dove’ or hear the voice, but it is implied that it is not just a private moment for Jesus. It is a manifestation of God visible to all who are paying attention. In this moment, Jesus is graced with the resources and power he will need to live out his baptismal ministry. In this moment, the very human Jesus is just like everyone around him. And just like any one of us.

It’s been said that “more is started in baptism than is accomplished at the moment. The requisite qualities of the baptized, therefore, are openness, expectation, the desire to grow, and the ability to trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” [A. Theodore Eastman, *The Baptizing Community*] Just like everyone of us who are baptized, Jesus will grow into his ministry with time, trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit – even when it leads him out into the wilderness where he is tempted. Jesus’ baptism and ours, much like the Eucharist, is a moment of anamnesis, that is, the opposite of amnesia or forgetting. It is a moment of re-remembering. Or re-remembering, putting back together, as in once again becoming whole. Baptism reminds Jesus and reminds us who we are and who we are becoming.

In a few minutes, we will renew our own baptismal vows – those that we made or those that were made for us when we were baptized. Today, baptismal water flows over us, if only literarily and metaphorically. It’s a reminder that we, too, are anointed as God’s beloved children. We, too, are empowered and given gifts to live out our baptismal ministries. Today’s passage from Luke is not merely a historical telling of the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. This message is for us, too. You might be saying to yourselves right now, “Yeah, yeah. We know baptism’s important.” But by periodically renewing our vows throughout the church year, we are given the opportunity to reflect upon whether we really take our vows seriously, day in and day out.

Look for a moment at what we will be promising once again to do:

- To keep alive the apostles’ teaching, fellowship and prayers

- To acknowledge our sins, repent and return to the Lord (just like all those sorry people on the banks of the Jordan)
- To see Christ in each person we meet and to respect the dignity of every human being
- To work for justice and peace

So if some part of us believes that the world we hear about in the news is not as it should be, it would seem that we are not crazy or have idealistic stars in our eyes. If we yearn for something better than simply acquiring more and more, or defending what we think we have 'earned,' we are not odd or greedy. If, in those quiet moments of reflection, or in those appalled moments of reaction, we feel like there is something missing in the world that is more than we ourselves can bring about, we are not dreamers or cynics. Rather, we are feeling God's nudge to live into our baptismal covenant more deeply.

Baptism is not just about you or just about me. It is, first of all, all about God. And what God does through baptism – equipping and empowering us to be at work in the world, and reminding us that we are not alone. Gifting us, and at the same time claiming us as beloved. Through the words of the prophet, Isaiah, God says to each of us and to all of us collectively, "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you...do not fear, for I am with you."

On this day, as we renew our baptismal vows, may we, too, be filled with expectations for our future that is already in God's hands. May we feel the presence and the power and the passion of the Living God descending upon us as we go out to love and serve the Lord. And may we, too, filled as we are with water and stardust, be an Epiphany in word and in deed, a showing forth, a revelation of our Loving God to the world around us! +