

**Epiphany One A - 1/13/08
Baptism of Jesus
St. David's**

It was a typical July day in our stunningly beautiful, agoraphobic, red rock desert. Though it is completely against my nature, I arose an hour before sunrise that morning in the Needles district of Canyonlands National Park. I got up at such an ungodly hour, because I was about to begin a hike across the open desert in the middle of summer. The other few hearty, intelligent souls camping there that morning, had all chosen hiking trails with lots of shade. Only I was feebleminded enough to walk such an exposed route.

My only defense is that at the time, I lived back East, and I had just this one opportunity to reach a destination I had literally been dreaming about for years. The spot I longed to reach is one of the most remote locations in all of the contiguous United States. At the time, it was even more removed from civilization than it is today. My destination is known simply as...The Confluence. It is the place where the two great rivers of the Western United States merge together. Though that hike was 25 years ago, I still remember with vivid

intensity how I lost my breath when I first saw the thick chocolate of an undammed Colorado river merging with the translucent Green river in the absolute middle of nowhere.

Years later, I would finally fulfill another lifelong dream and make the float trip down that same Colorado on an oar powered raft. On day five of that trip, we rounded a bend and saw another confluence, this time the aqua green of a damned Colorado, bisected by the Little Colorado River, with the most beautiful turquoise water I had ever seen in my life. The colors were so vibrant and intense and so unlike anything I had ever seen before in the natural world, that I struggled believing that what I was seeing was actually real.

Then there was the early morning that I was walking along a deserted beach in Crystal Cove State Park in southern California. The ocean waves were rejuvenating my broken spirit. Just as I was beginning to feel alive again, I looked up in time to see a gray whale breach right in front of me, lifting his entire body out of the water, before crashing back into the sea in a gigantic explosion of water. I was totally dumfounded. I looked around to share the moment with

someone, only to realize that there was not one person in sight in either direction up or down the beach.

On another occasion, Jean and I had planned a backpack with a group of friends down into the Supai Indian reservation. Our plan was to drive to the canyon rim the night before and get up early to begin our hike. Jean and I had volunteered to make breakfast for everyone at the top of the Canyon before we began. But our vehicle broke down in Las Vegas that night, and by the time we arrived early the next morning, it was 45 minutes before we were to start hiking. None of that made any difference though when we finally arrived exhausted in the village and then walked downriver to see the three most beautiful waterfalls I have ever seen, before or since.

There has also been our encounter with 50 Orca whales in Washington, the coral reefs of Hawaii with fish and water so beautiful you want to cry in your snorkel gear, and the day I had a dolphin leap over my kayak in California and swim with me for fun. Just last year, Jean and I went to Natural Bridges National Monument and I encountered a thunderstorm as I walked from Kachina bridge to

Owachamo. As I rounded that last bend, there was the long, slender bridge, with a vibrant rainbow bisecting the middle of it.

As most of you know, I am a desert rat through and through. But you may have noticed that every one of the stunning events I have just described involved water. These are the moments in my life when I have most palpably experienced the presence of God in nature. Water in all sorts of forms and landscapes have most often linked me directly to the Holy Spirit in my life.

Apparently, it was the same for many who recorded their own experiences of God in our sacred text. Like us, the folk who wrote down the stories of both the Hebrew and Christian testaments were also desert rats. They lived in a land very reminiscent of our own Colorado Plateau. In fact, sometimes it is all but impossible to distinguish the difference between the two, even when you compare photos of the two regions side by side. But just like us, these biblical narrators tell us story after story of how they experienced God in their rivers and seas. This is stated without qualification in today's Psalm. "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters, the glory of God thunders,

the Lord is upon the mighty waters.” Water, of course, is the lead player in the most important story in Judaism, the Exodus. In the Christian bible, the sea of Galilee becomes the place of the impossible catch of fish and the miracle of Jesus on the water. It is no surprise then, that when we come to today’s Gospel, it is when Jesus comes up out of the waters of the river Jordan, that he has too has a dramatically powerful experience of the Holy Spirit. That experience of God is symbolized by a dove descending upon him.

The dove hearkens back to more water, reminding us of the appearance of a dove to Noah at the end of the flood, once again connecting water and God. In addition, the story of Jesus’ baptism takes us all the way back to Genesis one. The sky ripping open is a reminder of the story of the primordial waters at the beginning of creation.

It is not accidental or coincidental that water becomes associated with baptism during the formation of our religion. What better way to capture the essence of the most important act in our faith, then to symbolize it with the aspect of nature that has most

connected all of us to God throughout the ages?

If you think I overemphasize the importance of baptism and water for us, consider the following. Today's Gospel is one of only three stories that appear in all four canonical Gospels. (The other two are the story of the cleansing of the temple and parts of the passion narrative.) This story is so important that the first Gospel written, the Gospel of Mark, begins with Jesus' baptism. In the early church, today's feast day was much more important than Christmas or Epiphany. That's because today is when it all starts for Jesus.

As we all know, there is a major vacuum of stories in our Bible that say anything about Jesus between his birth and today's baptism. There is, in fact, only one such story, the one about Jesus appearing in the temple at age 12 in the Gospel of Luke.

Why do we have only one story of Jesus from birth up through his baptism? Well, to be blunt, it's because before today, Jesus didn't do a thing. Before Jesus is baptized, his life was totally inconsequential. It is so inconsequential that even after Christ's resurrection, when everyone wants to know every detail about him, the evangelists can

still find nothing to say about him before today's monumental event.

For Jesus, everything begins with baptism. For Christianity,

everything begins with baptism. For each of us, everything begins with baptism.

The importance and wonder of Baptism is captured perfectly by the experiences each of us have had with water in our own lives. We understand baptism when we remember what it felt like when that dolphin swam with us or when we first saw Havasu Falls. We understand baptism when we feel that unbelievable connection that runs through our church whenever one of us is baptized within this community. We capture the magnificence of baptism when we feel its call to protect the dignity of every human being and work together to experience the Holy Spirit through each other.

Unfortunately, over the years it seems that we have lost baptism's beauty and significance, and replaced it with some sort of magic act. We see this distorted view of the sacrament already beginning to emerge in today's Gospel. When we read the earliest account of Jesus' baptism in the Gospel of Mark, the author matter of

factly describes John baptizing Jesus. But by the time we get to Matthew's version, the early church bureaucracy has begun to form. This new church structure is troubled by the notion of a sinless Jesus submitting himself to baptism by the self proclaimed lowly prophet, John the Baptist. Hence, in today's text we hear John saying, "I need to be baptized by you, not the other way around."

To believe that Jesus is too good to be baptized by John is to totally miss the point of baptism. Baptism is not magic. It does not make something happen to us. Baptism is the symbol of the life giving Holy Spirit that has already become a part of Jesus and a part of us at our baptism. John sticking his cousin in the river doesn't change Jesus. The change occurred during those 40 days he spent in the wilderness. His baptism is the representation of that change. In addition, the church needn't worry about John baptizing Jesus. That's because John is not the actor here. The one doing the baptizing is God. If the legitimacy of a sacramental action rested on the status of the priest providing the sacrament, then all of you would be in trouble. That's why Jesus has no problem with John baptizing him. John is

nothing more than a conduit to connect Jesus to God. And that's what baptism is all about for each of us. It links us to each other, to all of God's creation and to the Holy Spirit.

Centuries later, we would distort the beauty of baptism once again by turning it into some sort of regulatory act. The church would link baptism to the Augustinian concept of original sin. The logic goes something like this; because of the sin of Adam and Eve, all of us are stained from our birth and the only way to get rid of it is through the waters of baptism. Baptism suddenly moved from being a gift from God to a mandatory act to save us from eternal damnation.

Unfortunately, this is the understanding of baptism that remains with much of the western church today. How bizarre, I have to wonder, would Jesus find such an explanation of what he does in the river Jordan today. My friends, baptism is not a blunt instrument to beat us into submission. As Kathleen Norris has so eloquently put it, baptism is not a weapon of mass destruction. It is a sacrament, the sacrament, that brings us to our own epiphanies of God.

Another major distortion of baptism is the understanding that this

is an individual act that is only between the person being baptized and God. Nothing could be further from Jesus' understanding. Baptism is the ultimate communal event. We are reminded of this in Matthew's Gospel, a few verses before today's Gospel begins. "Then the people of Jerusalem and ALL Judea were going out to John, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan." Jesus was not baptized alone. He was baptized with throngs of people. Perhaps even more importantly, note that Matthew is making a direct reference in today's Gospel to the initial sentence of our first reading from Isaiah. God's words in 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." And God's words as Jesus comes up out of the water. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.", whereupon the Spirit lights upon him. Matthew purposely uses the exact same metaphors as Isaiah.

But when we read further in that reading from Isaiah, we realize that God is not speaking of one person who will bring about this

justice, but he is addressing these comments to all of God's people. "I am Yahweh," he says, "remember me?" "I'm the one who took you by the hand and kept you, I'm the one who called ALL of you into covenant, and now I'm calling ALL of you to be a light to the nations." Jesus hears that call and lives it as completely as anyone ever. But the point here is not that Jesus is special in this regard, but rather that is the call we all receive at baptism. Baptism is a corporate call to all of us to begin our public ministries when we are baptized, to stand up against the worldly powers that distort God's call of full dignity for all. We, like Jesus, are called to stand together in the face of Roman rulers or contemporary leaders who continue to try to separate us from one another through polarizing tactics, or war cries. We, like Jesus, are called to stand in the way of those who continue to advocate for unjust public policies that degrade rather than uplift each of us. We are called to this task of caring for one another and all of God's earth through our baptisms.

If we are going to live into our own baptismal covenants and bring back the real meaning of baptism into our church and our lives,

we need to start with that wonderful symbol of living water. We need to remember how those who wrote our sacred text experienced God first and foremost through the waters of creation and the waters of their own lives. We need to remember our own experiences with water, the wonder and mystery of the whales and the dolphins, the turquoise waterfalls and the rainbows through natural bridges. We need to remember how we felt the presence of the Holy Spirit with us at those wonderful moments if we are to understand what happens at Baptism.

That is why, as we move to completion of our new sanctuary, the most prominent and obvious features as you enter our new church will be that living water, the water that connects each of us with the beginning of time, the water that links us to the entire history of Israel, the water that reminds us of the most God filled moments in our lives. May those waters remind us of our own dramatic experiences of the divine every time we see them and may they constantly reconnect us with each other, with all of God's creation and with the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

