

First Sunday after the Epiphany (Baptism of our Lord)

January 8, 2023

St. Michael's Episcopal Church

The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath

Gospel: Matthew 3:13-17

While I am not as great a baker as some of our parishioners are, I do like to bake. And because I think all meals should start with dessert first, I typically like to bake sweet things – cakes, cookies, pies, tarts, etc. Aside from the deliciousness of baked goods, I've always been fascinated by the process of baking. Essentially, you take a disparate group of ingredients – for example, eggs, butter, milk, oil, spices, salt (maybe) – and mix them all together. Usually, I say a little prayer as I am ready to put the unbaked mix into the oven. A few minutes later – presto-chango! – a beautiful cake emerges. It's not really a matter of faith that the cake will rise, or the cookies will take shape. It's a matter of science. And the key scientific ingredient in baking is the presence of a binding agent, without which the mix will come out as formless as it went in.

There are many different types of binding agents – wheat flour, oatmeal, milk, rice, gelatin, tapioca, and water, just to name a few. The important thing is that without the binding agent to activate the other ingredients, the magic and joy of baking would be non-existent. And, in my opinion, a world without baked goods would be just plain sad. I have found that church coffee hours are especially wonderful with the presence of one or two (or three or four) baked goods. To this I say, God bless binding agents!

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus Christ. In the context of our faith, Baptism is a key sacrament through which a person is initiated by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body, the church. God establishes an indissoluble bond with each person in baptism, making us members of the church and inheritors of the Kingdom of God (BCP, pp. 298, 858). In baptism we share in the new life of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins.

Our tradition in the Episcopal Church is to baptize infants and adults. And our tradition gives us many opportunities to be reminded of our baptism. I sprinkle water as a reminder of our baptism on the congregation by at Easter – a tangible symbol of our resurrection into this new life through the waters of baptism. Just like the binding agents in baking, water bind us to God in a new life, in a new way of living life.

In today's Gospel, Jesus has come to John in order to be baptized. Perhaps, like me, you were wondering why on earth Jesus needed to be baptized. I thought he was already good to go. Isn't he supposed to be the Son of God? Well he is. He's both human and divine. And this humanity and divinity – which is so often at odds with each other – needs to be reconciled. One of the aspects of the human condition is that we are always seeking ways to bind ourselves to that which is our source – and there have been many names used throughout history: the Great Beyond, the Lord of Lords, the Most High, OM, the Ancient of Days, Elohim, God.

And here is Jesus standing before John, in all his humanity and divinity asking to be baptized. And John protests! John recognizes the divinity in Jesus and knowing his very human brokenness says to Jesus "I need to be baptized by you." This isn't how it's supposed to work, John says. But this is indeed how it's supposed to work, Jesus responds. God's plan is God's plan. Jesus says, "it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all

righteousness.” Righteousness is closely connected to an awareness of the coming Kingdom. Righteousness means following Jesus as a faithful disciple and participating in that kingdom. Righteousness is becoming aligned with God’s deep desire to love us. And for Jesus, this adherence to fulfilling all righteousness will lead to his death upon a cross some three years later. And it will also lead to his resurrection three days after his death.

But it still makes me wonder why John had to baptize Jesus. Why couldn’t Jesus, being divine and all, just walk into the river, take a quick dip and – presto-chango! – fulfill the righteousness he was called to fulfill? I think we need to remember that Jesus was saying he AND John are called to fulfill all righteousness. Both broken humanity (embodied in John) and incarnate divinity (embodied in Jesus) have a hand in ushering in God’s Kingdom.

It’s important to see that Jesus includes John in the plan. They have to do this together. This moment when John lowers Jesus under the water binds the ministry that went before, preparing the way, with the ministry that is just beginning – that *is* the Way. As Jesus submits to baptism, he puts himself in the same position as the people he came to save, and he does it in a very literal, tangible way that they can see. But in a very personal way, because his baptism serves as the initiation for that saving work.

Our baptism serves not only as an initiation into the Body of Christ, but as an initiation into saving work, into ushering the Kingdom of God. If you were baptized in the Episcopal Church, you, or your sponsors on your behalf if you were a baby, made a series of promises known as the Baptismal Covenant. You, or your sponsors, were asked:

- “Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?”
- “Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?”
- “Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?”
- “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”
- “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”

And you, or your sponsors, all replied “I will, with God’s help.” And God’s help, the binding agent, if you will, is the water of baptism that binds the Holy Spirit to us and us to God. We are bound – humankind to God, God to humankind; humanity to divinity, divinity to humanity. It is being thus bound that good things can happen, God’s saving work can be done, and the deliciousness of life can be experienced.

The Baptism of our Lord Sunday is a good day to reflect on how we’re living up to our baptismal promises. Have you allowed the Holy Spirit to help you rise in ways that bring goodness and love into the world? Are you seeking and serving Christ in all persons? Are you striving for justice and peace, and respecting the dignity of every human being?

If you feel that you’re already out there living up to your Baptismal promises, then congratulations! You are fulfilling all righteousness! However, if you feel like you’re not fully living up to your promises and could do more, don’t worry. All the ingredients are there and the Holy Spirit is a binding agent that can be activated time and time again. It is the binding agent that reminds us that ushering in God’s Kingdom takes both humanity and divinity – us and God, God and us.

In the passage from Isaiah today, we read:

*I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

Seems like a tall order to me, but we can do all this and more, with God's help. *Amen.*