

Homily for the feast of the Baptism of the Lord

January 9-10, 2021

Readings: Isaiah 42: 1-4.6-7; Acts 10: 34-38; Mark 1: 7-11

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As the Gospel writers tell it, the significance of Jesus' baptism isn't really in the ritual of cleansing with water. The real meaning is found in what happens next. In a couple of simple sentences, Mark tells us three profound things: the heavens opened, the Spirit descended, and God spoke.

In the 1st century Jewish worldview, the dome of the sky separated what was above from what was below (Gen. 1:6-8). Clearly, God was "above," and creation—including humanity—was "below." So it's not just a throwaway detail when the Evangelists write that *the heavens were opened* after Jesus' baptism. This is their way of alerting us to a monumental concept. There is no longer a barrier separating God and humanity. Just as we celebrated two weeks ago at Christmas, we are again reminded that God has entered into our human existence. God is not only "above" but is also right here in the messy world.

In writing about Jesus' baptism, bestselling author Rachel Held Evans emphasizes God's nearness by pointing out that John the Baptist went outside (literally!) the traditional Jewish practices of ritual cleansing at the Temple. She writes, "The people didn't have to go to God anymore; God was coming to the people...[the] Temple could not contain a God who flattens mountains, or ceremonial baths a God who flows through rivers." According to Evans, John's baptism was, "celebrating God's wild, uninhibited presence in every corner of the earth."

This is especially Good News as we continue to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of us have not been physically at church in 10 months. It's hard to be away from these holy spaces where God's presence is so clear—in the tabernacle, shining through the stained glass, spilling forth from the community. But as Mark and Rachel Held Evans remind us, this does not mean that we are away from God. In the months since March, we have encountered God on creek-side trails, at our family dinner tables, in the honking horns of drive-by celebrations, and even over Zoom. The heavens have opened, and God is indeed present in every corner of our lives.

The account of Jesus' baptism emphasizes this very real presence of God with us by stating that *the Spirit descended* upon Jesus like a dove. Our faith affirms that we too receive the Holy Spirit in our own baptism. What a comfort this can be—to know that God's own Spirit lives, moves, and breathes in us. But if we look carefully at the readings, we realize that the indwelling of the Spirit in us is not just a comfort, but also a call. The prophet Isaiah wrote that

the one upon whom God has put the Spirit is the one who will bring forth justice, who will be a light to the nations, and who will bring out prisoners from confinement.

Just as COVID has helped us to see God's presence in every corner of the earth, it has also revealed injustice, darkness, and oppression. According to the Centers for Disease Control, Black and Latino patients are 2.8 times more likely to die from COVID than white patients. This statistic is just one of many that point to underlying systemic racism in our society which creates unequal access to health care, employment opportunities, and socioeconomic status. Today's second reading states that Jesus "went about doing good and healing those oppressed" because God was with him. If we truly believe that God is with us through our baptism and the gift of the Spirit, then we must also be about Jesus' work of doing good and healing oppression.

Lucky for us, the third symbol from the account of Jesus' baptism encourages us in our discipleship. After his baptism, God spoke to Jesus saying, "You are my beloved." In the Sacrament of Baptism, God makes the same declaration about each one of us. We are acceptable, we are chosen, we are pleasing to God, we are beloved. Recalling our nature as beloved by God is especially helpful in this season of New Year's resolutions, some of which we may already have fallen short on. Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber's New Year's Day social media post read, "Yearly reminder: there is no resolution that, if kept, will make you more worthy of love. You, as your actual self and not as some made up ideal, are already worthy."

We are beloved. We are called to work for justice. We are surrounded by the presence of God. In short: we are baptized. Thanks be to God for this grace.