

January 8, 2017  
The Baptism of our Lord, Year A, RCL  
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Isaiah 42:1-9  
Psalm 29  
Acts 10:34-43  
Matthew 3:13-17

The prophet Isaiah's first servant song, written during the later years of the Babylonian the exile, offers Israel assurance God had not abandoned God's people, who the prophet calls God's servant: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he [Israel] will bring forth justice to the nations." (Is. 42:1)

Christian tradition has long been known to read Jesus back into Isaiah's servant songs and suffering servant prophecies. As it turns out, Jesus, as he is portrayed in Gospels, may well be all of these things of which Isaiah speaks. And, at the same time, scholars argue the ancient prophet was not intentionally speaking of the future Messiah, but of the nation of Israel, as God's servant. As we just recently heard throughout Advent and Christmas, there are multiple echoes of Isaiah in Jesus' life, and even in his words.

The Twelve Days of Christmas ended on Thursday and we ushered in the season of Epiphany on Friday, as we do every 6<sup>th</sup> of January. I don't know about you, but I am always a little sad to put away the Christmas decorations, and there have been plenty of similar laments on social media lately. Last week's news reported folks in the UK tweeting under the symbol #*Epiphany* their superstitions about the necessary rush to take down Christmas decorations before Epiphany, lest the dreaded *hobgoblins* would move into the house. Charlie and I dutifully brought in the miniature white lights from our outdoor evergreen tree and bushes on Thursday, not for fear of the *hobgoblins* but rather to comply with our condominium bylaws about holiday decorations.

Actually, I could make a good argument for leaving the white twinkly lights in the bushes until Ash Wednesday. Epiphany, after all, is the season of light—the next chapter in the Christ story after Christmas—the revelation of Jesus as the light of the world. Epiphany marks the manifestation to the Gentiles of Jesus as Messiah in Matthew's story of the Magi who come all the way from the East, following a mysteriously bright star and bringing gifts, again echoing Isaiah's prophecy: "They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD." (Is. 60:6) After the Magi, the second big Epiphany event, revealing Jesus as Son of God, is Jesus' baptism, where in all four Gospels the Spirit descends upon him "like a dove." In the Gospel according to John, John the Baptist says he "...*saw* the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on [Jesus]." (Jn. 1:32)

My older sister Patty's Baptism was the first one I ever witnessed, and is still an indelible memory for me. I was about 7 years old and, at the time, my family attended Calvary Baptist Church with my grandmother. Patty's Baptism happened at a special Sunday evening service, just for her. Our parents, along with two grandmothers and several aunts and uncles filled the first several pews of the jam-packed tiny church. The pulpit had been moved away from its usual central position and a section of the floor had been removed to reveal what we would call a font, but to my 7-year-old eyes was a giant tank filled with water—it was about the size of 4 or 5 big bathtubs. My sister came in robed in white, and the minister, robed in black, took her into the water that came up to his waist. He asked Patty some questions, she answered, and he put his arm around her shoulders and submerged her whole body (head and all) into the water. They both came out of the water tank soaking wet: clothes, hair, and all, and the whole congregation cheered and applauded—everyone but me. I was absolutely terrified. Later, I told my parents they could forget about any plans they might have had that I would ever, ever set foot in that tank. And, by the grace of God, I never did.

My own Baptism happened about six years later, and could not have been more different. Our family, by then, had joined the Methodist Church in town, and I was in a large Confirmation class with about 25 of my friends. Confirmation Sunday was coming up, and the youth pastor, Reverend Jennings, realized that I had fallen into a baptism gap. The Methodist Church practiced infant baptism,

as opposed to the Baptist tradition of “believers’ baptism” (where the baptismal candidate needs to be old enough to make their own declaration of faith). My family had left the Baptist Church before I was old enough for their baptism in the big scary water tank (that’s when I knew, for sure, there is a God and God loves me).

One afternoon I was at church for choir practice and Reverend Jennings sought me out to remedy the problem—the problem being, I could not be confirmed without having first been baptized. Reverend Jennings put on his black robe and a white stole, he asked a church secretary to come along as a witness, and together we entered the big empty church. I stood behind the altar rail with Reverend Jennings. He said some prayers, asked me some questions, I answered, and he took the cover off a little silver vile of consecrated water that he spritzed over my head as he baptized me in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. It all took less than ten minutes. My blue shirt and red and blue plaid jumper were completely dry. Not even was my hairdo ruined. For a 13-year-old girl, it could not have been more perfect. Not until seminary, decades later, would I realize my pro forma baptism had been all about checking off a box on my Confirmation paperwork, and it had been completely absent the deep symbolism of my sister’s scary full immersion baptism.

Baptism is about a death, of sorts—dying to sin and then rising to a new life—emerging from the deep, dark water cleansed and awash in the Spirit of God. John the Baptist was preaching repentance of sin, thus the question is asked, “Why was Jesus, who is without sin...why does Jesus insist that John baptize him?” When John objects on the basis of his own perceived unworthiness Jesus insists, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for *us* in this way to fulfill all righteousness. ” (Mt. 3:15) Righteousness, as in, God’s will. Together, Jesus and John would fulfill what Jesus knew to be God’s will. Jesus’ baptism foreshadows his death—his immersion into the deep pool of our human sin—and his rising (and by his gift of grace, our rising) to eternal life.

Essentially, the church baptizes because Jesus was baptized. At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, the risen Jesus says to the disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (Mt. 28:19-20) From the earliest Acts of the Apostles, it is clear baptism was, from the get-go, the rite of initiation into the Messianic community. As the early house churches grew into a more institutional church, requirements for baptism preparation became rigorous. The days of Phillip spontaneously baptizing an Ethiopian eunuch on the roadside, and Paul baptizing entire households of new followers, gave way to a three-year catechism system of instruction and examination for those seeking baptism and membership in the early church. There was nothing pro forma about it. Leaders of the early church wanted to make sure catechumens were deeply serious about dying to their former selves to live a new life in Christ Jesus.

Four years ago, during Lent, Charlie and I went on a Holy Land pilgrimage. We visited two very different and equally stirring sections of the Jordan River. First, we hiked through a gorgeous blooming spring meadow down, down, down into the dark woods, making our way along a trail that would bring us to a waterfall and a roiling stream that is one of the Jordan River headwaters. The narrow walking trail between the wall of rock (on one side) and the bank alongside loud rushing waters was slippery. It was impossible not to get wet from the spray. Suddenly, the meaning I had missed in my baptism-on-the-fly more than 40 years earlier washed over me in that Jordan River shower.

Later, we were driven to a modern-looking Jordan River touristy site—a big black-top parking lot with large tour bus parking spaces, restrooms, a restaurant, and (of course) a tacky gift shop selling all manner of Jordan River memorabilia, from key chains to T-shirts. Naturally, we had to walk through the gift shop to get to the Jordan. Unlike the earlier dramatic headwater stream, this section of the Jordan was flat, calm, and kind of a slimy-looking green, probably from the mud-bottom. For a few coins one could get a vending machine towel, and for a few more coins, use a hairdryer to recover from a dip in the river. In spite of the commercialism, there was one very poignant sight: there were several groups of 3 or 4 people here and there along the winding stretch of the Jordan who were robed

in white and baptizing one another. There they were, some 2,000 years later, doing what John and Jesus had done in those very waters.

This First Sunday after the Epiphany, when we remember and celebrate the Baptism of our Lord, is one of the Sundays in the year when Baptizing new Christians is especially appropriate. And, when we don't have an actual baptismal candidate this is an occasion for all of us to renew our own baptismal vows, which we will do, here, in just a moment. As we recite those vows (again), I invite us all to feel the dramatic spray of the Jordan River headwaters, to really listen and take to heart just what it is we are promising—and, when we leave here today, to do our level best to live into our baptismal vows. May we see ourselves, as Christ's chosen, in the words of Isaiah's servant song: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon [her/upon him]; [she/he] will bring forth justice to the nations." (Is. 42:1)