

January 12, 2020
First Sunday after the Epiphany (Baptism of the Lord), Year A
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

Back on November 17, my sermon focused on the following sentence from the day's reading from Luke: "When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'" ¹ That was the Sunday before my installation as rector, and I used that as a launching point to talk about the early history of this church, its first rector, and remaining faithful in anxious times. It didn't occur to me then to make the connection to some particular stones that will very soon be thrown down.

Neither did it occur to me that the throwing down of those stones would be of interest to anyone besides us. Therefore it was to my surprise that St. Thomas's was in the news this week, in stories from the *New Haven Register*, the *New Haven Independent*, WNPR, NBC Connecticut, and WTNH. We have probably never had that much publicity in a week before, probably not in the past ten years. Of course, *we* were only sort of in the news. In case you haven't heard, those stories were related to the old St. Thomas's Church building. Remember, the church was originally located downtown, on Elm Street near Orange Street, just off the New Haven Green. That building was dedicated in 1855, the year memorialized on the backlit square of stained glass mounted on the wall at the end of the hall upstairs. That's the sole piece of stained glass saved when the church moved here in 1939. The only other things we seem have from that building are the ornately carved bishop and rector chairs in the Lounge, that lectern, and this pulpit. One hundred and seventy-two years later, I am only the sixth rector to have preached from this pulpit.

After the church moved here, the new owners of the old building essentially enclosed its walls within a new shell. That entire site is being cleared for redevelopment—they're putting in a hotel. Those enclosing additions are being removed first, and so parts of the original church building have been uncovered. Now visible are most of the original slate roof and the eastern brownstone wall. Apparently this is attracting the attention of passersby. Though this made the news just last week, the old church has been visible since at least the week before Christmas; that's when I stopped by the site to have a look. By then, our parish administrator, Julie, had already phoned the contractor to ask them to collect any discards that we might be interested in. She particularly asked then to look out for a time capsule that was buried in the original foundation, and which seems never to have been recovered; it's a mystery.

Eventually the stones of that old church *will* come down. So if you haven't checked it out, you should, and pretty soon. It's quite something to see, actually; it's little disconcerting, and, for me, surprisingly sad. So even before the television reporters contacted us for comments, I had been asking myself what that uncovering and pending demolition has to do with us. I'm going to get back to that.

Today is the first Sunday after the Feast of the Epiphany; it's the Sunday the church recognizes the baptism of Jesus. The baptism of Jesus is one of the traditionally recognized epiphanies—the manifestations for human witnessing of the divinity of the human Jesus. This is considered to be a particularly appropriate Sunday for baptisms, and we're fortunate to have a baptism today.

With today's gospel reading, we leap from Jesus' infancy to his full adulthood. In doing so, we pick up reading Matthew where we left off on December 8, which was the second Sunday of Advent. It was then that we heard about the baptizing John, wearing camel-hair clothing, eating honey-and-locust meals, and drawing crowds to the Jordan River in the wilderness of Judea. In that Sunday's reading, John said, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."² Today, we pick up there, and we hear that Jesus has journeyed to the Jordan River to receive John's baptism.

Jesus has journeyed to the Jordan River to receive John's baptism, but it can't be exactly the same baptism that John has provided to others. After all, as theologians have posited over the ages, Jesus was perfect and therefore sin-free. John may be preaching repentance, but Jesus has *nothing* for which to repent.

Of course it's a setup. For everyone else being baptized, the key action is the change of heart that takes place *before* that dip below the surface. But for Jesus, the key action is what happens *afterwards*. Therefore I think the point is not *repentance* but rather *manifestation*. And it's a manifestation in Trinitarian form: the Son comes up from the water to the alighting of the Spirit and the voice of the Father. For humans who perceive via their physical senses, God communicates this epiphany of triune divinity via a trio of human sensory stimuli: see the Son; feel the Spirit; hear the Father.

In a few minutes, we're going to baptize Sylvia Margaret. The "Catechism" portion of *The Book of Common Prayer* says this: "Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God."³ This emphasizes baptism as initiation, but the does "Catechism" go on to talk about repentance and forgiveness of sins. And during the baptism today you'll hear that language of sin and repentance. But it's a little hard to square with what we're doing today. At this point in little Sylvia's life, the only transgression she has possibly had the opportunity to commit is excessive crying. And that is *no* sin for a person with limited means of communication.

And so it is that Sylvia's baptism seems a lot less like John's baptism of those regular folks, and a lot more like John's baptism of Jesus. With Sylvia, as for Jesus, maybe the point is not the *repentance* but rather the *manifestation*. God is made present to us never more clearly than through a baby. Today we will all be privileged to witness Sylvia's baptism; as grace is conferred on *her*, it is conferred on *us*. Imagine, if you will, Sylvia plunged into the depths and then gasping to the surface—we see holiness embodied in one upon whom the Spirit alights and with whom the Creator is well pleased.

After John baptizes Jesus, Jesus pushes his feet against the firm bed of the Jordan River, launching himself forth from those waters for that Trinitarian display. It's a turning point: from there, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness and then begins his public ministry. At that moment of manifestation, everything changes.

I think baptism itself must also have changed: it seems to me that it could never again be *only* about repentance; it must *also* and *essentially* be about manifestation. I don't mean to deny the power and prevalence of sin; there is much transgression that cries out for atonement, both individual and communal. But I still don't think our primary identity is that of *sinner*. And a lot of what we're talking about today is identity. I think our primary identity is that of *child of God*, carrier of the spark of the divine. That can never be removed. Maybe manifestation and repentance *are* related: glimpses of God remind us of who we *really* are; they *bring us to* and *strengthen us for* repentance; they strengthen us for that *turning toward God* through which we *turn toward love*. Imagine yourself plunged into the depths and then gasping to the surface—there also is holiness embodied in one upon whom the Spirit alights and with whom the Creator is well pleased.

Last week I spoke to reporters about a congregation that has been brave enough to change with changing times. That is nothing to sneeze at, and that wall is a valuable reminder that this congregation is one that was brave enough to change with changing times. I spoke reporters about service and justice and inclusion, because that's another way that this congregation has changed with changing times. I spoke about the past as a foundation, one that should hold up the church of today without holding it back; holding back is not what we are supposed to be about. I spoke to reporters about continuing to look to the future, and for how that informs the present.

We are the body of Christ. We are the sunlight that breaks the dawn.

Notes

¹ Luke 21:5-6 NRSV.

² Matthew 3:11 NRSV.

³ *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, 858.