

The Baptism of Our Lord  
Text: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22  
Preacher: Vicar Stephanie Kershner

St. Peter's Lafayette Hill, PA  
January 10, 2010

“The Full Baptismal Experience”

What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘baptism’? An image? Maybe an image of water. Is the water flowing or is it in a font? Does it come from a faucet or a stream? Is it cold or warm to the touch? Perhaps you see an image of the Holy Spirit. What does the Holy Spirit look like? A dove? A great beam of light? Fire? Or maybe you think of a baptism that you’ve been a part of. Maybe your child’s or your godchild’s. What does baptism mean for you? Does it mean a new beginning, a new life, a new community?

Each of us has different visions, images, and thoughts about baptism. When I think of baptism a couple of stories come to mind. The first is of my own baptism, and some of you have heard about it before. Of course I don’t remember my own baptism since I was just an infant but the series of events leading up to my baptism have been told by my parents to many friends and family members over the years. The day I was born, President Reagan was shot (I’ll give you a second to mentally figure out how old I am...). The day I came home from the hospital Pope John Paul II was shot. Then, on the morning of my baptism, our pastor fell down his basement stairs, was rushed to the hospital and had to get over fifty stitches in his head. My parents were beginning to think I was possessed or something. However, I was baptized that day but they had to call another pastor in from another congregation.

When my nephew Mateus was baptized I got the church giggles. You’ve all had them before. You start to chuckle under your breath a little. And then your whole body starts to shake, and then you start to snort. It’s really quite embarrassing but oh so funny. My sister was holding Mateus who was about nine months, over the font while the priest held the pitcher of water over my nephew’s head. The priest said Mateus Thoren Porter, I baptize you in the name of the Father...” Then he poured a little water from the pitcher onto my nephew’s head. Mateus looked around quizzically, wondering where the water had come from. “the Son...” the priest poured a little more out, Mateus was able to focusing on the pitcher, knowing that the water was coming from it. “and the Holy Spirit...” The priest went to pour the last bit of water out onto Mateus’ forehead but instead, my nephew jutted out his chubby little arm, and put his hand on the neck of the pitcher pushing against it so the water couldn’t come out. This is when I started giggling and continued pretty much until the end of the baptismal service because I could not get that image of him out of my head.

The first time I was really aware of how baptism is a powerful experience for a whole community was when I was in college. At that time I attended Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in

Akron, Ohio. Holy Trinity is a huge stone cathedral building with long, skinny aisles in the center and at the sides. The church had two pastors, the Senior Pastor and the Pastor Emeritus, named David Scharf. Pastor Scharf was a man over the age of 80 and over six feet tall. He had a big booming voice. At that baptism, Pastor Scharf came down from the baptismal font holding the small infant that had just been baptized in his huge arms. He walked down the long aisle, holding the baby high, singing ‘This Little Light of Mine’ in his big voice. Pastor Scharf smiled and smiled. It almost seemed like he was glowing. His smile filled every single person in that church with joy. Seeing this infant in Pastor Scharf’s big arms, I felt excited about her new life with Christ. I could feel the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit all around me. I could feel the presence of God in the community of witnesses gathered that day. As each of us reached out to welcome this precious baby with the promise to support her on her Christian journey, a community was formed.

Today’s gospel reading tells us of another baptism, the baptism of Jesus. This baptism is one that also conjures up images. Even though we weren’t there that day, and we don’t have any video footage or still photos from that day we can imagine what took place. We can imagine John the Baptist wearing camel’s hair for clothing, eating bugs for his meals. I imagine he probably had a huge beard and long, tangled hair. I imagine even though he was spending a lot of time in the water baptizing others, he probably didn’t smell so great. I imagine that when camel’s hair gets wet it doesn’t smell good.

Today’s text says there were people there that day with John at the Jordan. I can imagine many people gathered around him. Some probably thought he was a little off his rocker. Some were probably true followers of John and his teachings. Some were probably wondering if he was the Messiah. I imagine that none of them were probably expecting Jesus to show up. Jesus, the true Messiah. The man that John had been preaching about. None of them were expecting the heavens to be opened and a dove to descend. And surely none of them were expecting a voice from heaven that said “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. But there were people there. People who saw this first hand. People who witnessed this most holy event. I imagine that after they experienced this baptism, every single time they thought about baptism or spoke about baptism they talked about the baptism of Jesus. They probably passed down this story to their children and their children’s children and on down the line. There were probably great grandchildren telling their friends “Yeah, my great grandmother saw Jesus baptized.”

One of the things I love about Luke’s account of the baptism of Jesus is that it includes all who were gathered there that day. All of those people that were standing along the Jordan were included in the whole baptismal event, not just part of it. The Gospel of Matthew’s account says: And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to **him** and **he** saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. In Mark it says: And just as he was coming up out of the water, **he** saw the heavens torn apart

and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And in the Gospel of John it says: And John testified saying “**I** saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. **I** myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to **me**, ‘He on who you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And **I** myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

But Luke says: “Now when **all the people** were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” All the people. They all saw this happen. They saw Jesus baptized. They saw the heavens open. They saw the dove descend. They heard the voice of God. They were **all** witnesses to this. Not just John, not just Jesus but **all the people**. A community.

Jesus modeled baptism for us. Jesus was sinless. He did not need to receive the baptism that John preached about, a baptism of repentance of sins. He taught us how we should baptize, with people present, with community of witnesses. When we witness a baptism we are reminded of the responsibilities that came when water was poured over our heads and the word of God, Jesus entered our hearts. When we witness a baptism we are reminded of the community that brought us to the water to be cleansed and claimed as a child of God. When we witness a baptism we are reminded of the community we belong to now, a community that brings others to the water, a community where we love and are loved. A community where we care and we are cared for. A community in Christ.

In this month’s newsletter article I asked each of you to try to remember your baptism each day as part of your New Year’s resolutions. Each morning when Martin Luther washed his face he would make the sign of the cross on his forehead to remind him of his own baptism. Each morning, remember who you are with a splash of water and the sign of the cross. Each morning remember that you are a Christian witness in this community. Each morning remember that you are part of a great and glorious community. Amen.