

**9 January 2022**

**Grace Episcopal Church, Jefferson City, MO**

**1 Epiphany, Baptism of Our Lord, Year C**

**“Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening. Amen.”**

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord. Baptism is so hideously domesticated in the Episcopal Church that it's very difficult to grasp the true gravity of it. We dress our babies up in frilly white dresses, dribble water across their foreheads, get our photo op, and call it a day. It's hard from those tame traditions to actually experience the reality of baptism, which is, in its essence, a symbolic drowning. In early baptisms (and some traditions today), you went under without knowing fully if you would come back up, and that was part of the point. You can't be resurrected unless you die, and shoving someone underwater and holding them there is a really easy way to get someone to believe that's exactly what's about to happen.

Baptism is our entry into the church, how we become members of the Body of Christ. Well, all right, this community that we join at baptism, what is it? What is the purpose of the church? To answer that question, we have to ask what problem the church is trying to solve. If we go back to the Garden of Eden, we see

Eve engage with the serpent, and the serpent introduces the voice that will forevermore drive our grasping after power and things and control. That is the voice that says, “You are not enough.” Our sin is driven by the falsehood: “You are not enough.” We hear that voice and we do anything to hush it up, to somehow salvage our faltering self-image so we can drown out the words: “You are not enough.”

And so we sin. That voice drives us to, over and over. And sin is an addiction. We are addicted to a way of life that kills us, kills our planet, kills our future. We as Western Christians cannot seem to do anything that is systemically constructive to end the poverty, suffering, and oppression that plagues the world. And so our addiction traps us and everyone around the world in a planet and a society hurtling toward death.

So what is the purpose of church? Church should help us deal with this addiction. Church should be rehab from the addictions of sin that trap us into lording our wealth and power over the rest of the world. We think we need these patterns of sin to survive, just like any addict. So we need a community that helps us face our addiction. We need a community that helps us to die.

That’s kind of scary, isn’t it? Most of us if asked why we attend church would not say, “So I can die.” But this is the truth of baptism that we often gloss over.

We tend to think of baptism as one sacramental moment. Either as babies or children or adults, we are immersed or have water poured over our heads, and voila, that's baptism. A discrete and finite moment in time, which, by the way, is dependent on a priest. But Jesus' baptism was much longer than the 15 seconds it took in the River Jordan with his cousin John the Baptist. Jesus' baptism took forty days.

Forty days? The forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness immediately after the Jordan River moment were the completion of his baptism. He was driven there by the Spirit, and although he was without sin, he was in his humanity vulnerable to temptation to sin. So when he faced the Devil in the wilderness, that was his death to the addiction that plagues us all as humans. It was difficult. He was pushed to the limits of his strength. And it took time.

Forty is a significant number in the Bible. It is a number that reflects a period of struggle, being lost, searching, temptation, failure, but then, eventual completion. We have Noah and his family in the ark for the 40-day flood. We have the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years. We have Mary's pregnancy with Jesus for 40 weeks. And we have Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days.

So we need to ask ourselves, how are our experiences of 40 baptizing us? We say in our Renewal of our Baptismal Covenant: "Remember your baptism." You probably don't remember the 5 seconds of water poured over you, but I

guarantee you remember your 40 days or weeks or years in the wilderness of grief and shame and fear. Every day there are opportunities to remember and experience your baptism. It is the one sacrament that cannot be repeated—you may receive communion a thousand times, but you will only be baptized once. But the reason we don't need to repeat it is because from the day the water from the font touched you to today, God through God's people and God's world has been plunging you into death in the water and raising you back up to new life, over and over and over until you can remember it.

And what does remembering your baptism look like? What does it mean to live as a baptized person? A baptized person—baptized in the Spirit, not just someone who has had the literal sacrament but has experienced no change of self as a result of it—is, as we said, a new creation. And what is the defining characteristic of that new creation, that new person? That person is no longer afraid of death. That person no longer spends every minute of every day doing everything possible to stave off death, enslaved to the addiction of sin that causes us to exploit and hurt and dominate other people.

People who are baptized in the Holy Spirit have a rod of steel down their spines that helps them walk into death with eyes and hearts wide open. That is how we are made like Jesus in our baptism, because that is exactly what he did. The apostles experienced baptism in the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, baptism in fire

just like John the Baptist predicts in our reading today, and it enabled them to give their lives, to die as martyrs with joy for the gospel. And where did that baptism in fire, Pentecost, take place? Jesus sent them back to Jerusalem, to be together and to pray, back to the place where they betrayed him, to the place of their greatest shame and failure and pain.

And how long was Jesus with them before he ascended to the Father? 40 days. We're back to forty again. It is going to take 40 of something before we get the message that we have to walk freely into death—forty days, forty weeks, forty years, forty people carrying the message to us, forty catastrophes or blessings or communions or chances and changes of life.

People who are baptized, people who have chosen to enter the death of drowning—not drowning in a font, but drowning in the suffering of the world—are dying a death that by its faithfulness and love mirrors Jesus' death. And what was the result of Jesus' death? Resurrection. The moment that changed the world and broke the chains of death forever.

And when we are baptized—when we can walk into death with eyes and hearts wide open—we now have the ability to do something else remarkable. We can baptize other people. Not just priests, everyone. I don't mean everyone is literally going to stand at the font in here at Grace and sacramentally baptize people. But we've already discovered that baptism is much bigger than a single

sacramental moment. You baptize people by awakening them to the cosmic truth that God speaks in our gospel today: “You are my child, the Beloved, and with you I am well pleased.” That is the message from God that forever ends the lie we believed from the serpent: “You are not enough.” And then we walk freely into death—the death of our false selves and our power and our wealth and maybe even into physical death itself—because we know that those deaths are only the death of the prison of our addiction. It is death into freedom, death into love, death into resurrection and new life. And we will be willing to die to give other people the chance to taste that life.

Any time we have the chance to do what Jesus did, to lay down our life for our friends, in any way, small or large, that is a baptismal moment. That moment of death to self for the life of another is one drop of the water of baptism, the living water. And one drop at a time, together, we are baptizing each other and being baptized. It is the death of the lie, “You are not enough,” and the birth of the truth, “You are my child, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

I realize more every day how many people in the church community have been a part of baptizing me, and I pray that I may be a part of baptizing you. That’s what we’re here to do, and not just inside these walls but in and with and from everyone we meet. It has nothing to do with a specific religion and

everything to do with recognizing and loving and reflecting back the presence of God in one another.

Because we're not here to build or grow the church. We're here to partner with Jesus in loving and saving the world. A task that big is a 40 task: forty days, forty weeks, forty years, forty centuries, forty generations. But in that long forty, that forty that repeats and circles around and over again, marked by losing and finding, giving and giving up, weeping and rejoicing—I cannot imagine anyone else I would rather be with than you. Let us walk into death with the bravest of faiths that new life beckons from the other side. Let us remember our baptism.

**Amen.**