

Sermon Preached by The Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
January 8, 2017 Epiphany 1/Baptism of our Lord/Year A
Texts – Isaiah 42: 1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10: 34-43; Matthew 3: 13-17

When Margaret and I visited the Holy Land nearly seventeen years ago, we visited a site on the Jordan in the Galilee where Jesus' baptism was supposed to have happened. I say "a" site rather than "the" site because there is another site further south on the Jordan that people also claim to be the site that competes for tourists. Believe me, the United States has not cornered the market on kitschy tourist traps. You haven't seen anything 'till you've visited the Holy Land!

Tens of thousands of people every year visit the Jordan River, wading in with their small plastic containers that they use to carry home a small sample of the sacred water. A cynic easily can dismiss the crowds as deluded. It's just one more polluted river, they say. It has no relevance beyond that. Yet the vast majority of the people wading into the brown water are not deluded. They are every-day people like you and me. They go because they want to get close to something marvelous. They want to get close to something sacred. They can't explain it exactly, but they know they're stepping close to what some call "a thin place," a place where the membrane that separates things earthly from things heavenly becomes perceptibly permeable. The Jordan River is such a place.

What is it that draws people day after day to that river? What draws us to the waters of baptism? What draws us to Jesus? They are all really the same question.

Each year on this First Sunday after Epiphany we hear the story of Jesus' baptism from one of the first three gospels. Each gospel writer gives his own slight twist on the story. This year we hear Matthew's version, who gives us a little glimpse into a question surrounding Jesus' baptism that many early Christians probably were asking: if Jesus is the one for whom John was preparing, if Jesus is superior to John, then why is it that Jesus needs to be baptized by John? John even tries to deter Jesus. But Jesus insists that he be baptized, saying that it's part of his unfolding role to fulfill righteousness, something that Matthew is concerned about throughout his gospel. It's a matter of demonstrating that Jesus truly is the one who proclaims and shows the world what God's justice and love look like. His baptism connects him to all the others coming to John – and connects him to us. His life, ministry, death, and resurrection are for us. We are drawn to the river, we are drawn to the waters of baptism, we are drawn to Jesus, because Jesus draws himself to us.

The other unique twist Matthew puts on the story has to do with the direction of the voice that breaks forth from the heavens. When Jesus emerges out of the waters, he sees the heavens open to him and the Spirit of God alighting on him in the form of a dove, a symbol of new creation harkening back to the story of Noah. In that story, the dove brings back an olive branch, tangible evidence that the waters of the flood have subsided and a sign of God's intention to begin again, to stay with us.

Jesus' baptism too is a sign that God is beginning again, that God is staying with us, announcing to the world that God's love continues even through submersion in the chaos waters of the violence and deception that plague our times. In Matthew's gospel, God's announcement is not just a proclamation given to Jesus in secret. It's an announcement about

Jesus to the whole world: "this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Christ is the visible sign to us that God loves us, and that nothing can ever undermine or conquer that love. As Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

What is it that draws us to the river, to the waters of baptism, to Jesus? It's that love of God: that steadfast, ever-present, solid, love of God. Today, as we celebrate the event of Jesus' baptism that marked him as God's beloved, we also celebrate and renew our own baptism, which marks us as God's beloved. For that is who you are. You are God's beloved.

One of the last books written by Henri Nouwen, the author of many books on the Christian spiritual life, was one entitled *Life of the Beloved*. Nouwen wrote that book as a response to a request of a secular acquaintance to explain in simple terms the essence of the spiritual life. In it he names the experience of so many of us in this frenetic world who hear a mantra drummed into us from the time we are born. It's a mantra that says "If you want to be loved, you had better prove that you are worth loving. You must show it." Nouwen goes on to say

The spiritual life is a life in which you gradually learn to listen to a voice that says something else, that says, "You are the beloved and on you my favor rests." Jesus heard that voice. He heard that voice when He came out of the Jordan River. I want you to hear that voice, too. It is a very important voice that says, "You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter. I love you with an everlasting love. I have molded you together in the depths of the earth. I have knitted you in your mother's womb. I've written your name in the palm of my hand and I hold you safe in the shade of my embrace. I hold you. You belong to Me and I belong to you. You are safe where I am. Don't be afraid. Trust that you are the beloved. That is who you truly are.

Did you hear that? You are the beloved. That is who you truly are.

Last Sunday we wished each other a Happy New Year. It's a good wish that unfortunately has become sort of benign through over use. But we Christians begin our new year not just with a good wish for happiness. We begin our new year with a powerful reminder that we live in God's love. We begin in the conviction that we are God's beloved.

That is not merely a nice sentiment. It is the unshakable ground upon which we stand. It is who we are. And it is the cornerstone of our mission to the world.