

St. Thomas's Episcopal Parish in Newark  
Newark, DE

The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of our Lord – January 8, 2017/Year A  
Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

The Reverend Paul W. Gennett, Jr.

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*May my words reveal the greater glory of God. AMEN*

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I find the First Sunday after the Epiphany a shock to the system. The sanctuary, adorned with the wonders of light and greens reflecting the Christmas Season, is now barren. Becoming fuel for the Epiphany fire, and WHAT A FIRE it was again this year! Our homes are likewise now stark and cold like our winters day. Christmas is over, and based on the renewed comments and actions of past week in the plethora of media sites and sources, so is the essence of **Love come down to dwell amongst us** it seems.

Jesus wades into the Jordan, standing before John. John protests, Jesus requests, and John accedes. Opening himself fully to John, he slips below the swift muddy Jordan water, held by John for a time, a time, and a time again. Bursting through the surface again, gasping for air, water streaming down his face, his body. Vision clearing, the voice proclaims “*This is MY son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*” Jesus looks to the riverbank and sees EVERYONE – the rich and poor, the righteous and self-proclaimed ones, the farmer and the politician, the Palestinian from Galilee and the Hebrew from Jerusalem. Jesus sees and embraces EVERY ONE of God’s Created and his kingdom come.

**Jesus sees and embraces EVERYONE. The work of Christ begins ... the REAL work of Christmas begins.**

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All Gospels include the baptism of Jesus as the initiation of his earthly ministry. John is the only one that does not include the baptismal moment but references it by John the Baptist’s proclamation, “*He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.*” [1:29-34].

When Jesus comes to John for baptism, John’s response was one of incredulousness – “*I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?*” **Fulfillment** of the prophet’s word and obedience to God’s will are ongoing themes for Matthew. Being baptized by John, even without sin, Jesus calls those who will be disciples to a higher way of living their faith than required by any human law. Jesus stands with us in fulfillment of the greater call of God, from the Creation which God saw as “*good, very good*” to the prophetic promise of Isaiah of God’s coming chosen servant and Messiah in whom God delights – “*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*”

An important difference in Matthew's version from Mark and Luke is the word **THIS**. Where Mark and Luke recount the words as "*YOU are my Son ...*" Matthew records this event as **the public pronouncement of who Jesus was**. Every action of Jesus is the expression of God working through him. Through living our baptism as **apostles** of our Lord Jesus Christ, every action in our lives can and will be an expression of God and Jesus working through you and me to this day. The Holy Spirit that fills Jesus with the power of God is the same Spirit we are filled with through baptism.

Along with Jesus, our faithful living and ministry begins at our baptism. As Jesus immediately went into the Jordanian wilderness for his formation for ministry, we will find that our baptism is not a "golden ticket" through life. We will face challenges, suffering, disappointment, and pain. As we baptize our children, we teach them of living a life "on life's terms" that still brings pain, injustice, and poverty to which they are called to serve and heal the hurting world.

This is why we need to take our baptism seriously, but sadly too often, we do not. It is just another one of those "church things" we are supposed to do. We do not really hear the words we say in the Baptismal Covenant. We too quickly forget that this begins with God's declaration "*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased*" and this declaration is for **YOU AND ME** as well! Our baptism becomes **the beginning AND the end** rather than just our beginning the life of faith.

As the swirl of renewed commentary grows yet again through our interconnected cyber-world, it is critical for people of faith to live out of this central core of our baptism to equip us for the work of Christmas. For our spiritual life to be authentically grounded, we need to experience all these sources of life from the **inside out** and not from the **outside in**. This is the terrible codependent trap of our over-stimulated culture to allow "others" define who we are and whose we are instead of first, last, and always drawing from our deep well of faith. A mature faith life helps us **to die before we die – to die to our small self so the Big Self of mature faith guides our work of Christmas**.

We know baptism, when lived out of this place and in this way, leads us on a higher path. As Jesus was baptized and anointed into God for the sake of the world, we are anointed to share life in the fullness of our Triune God. This **setting apart** is the bedrock of the spiritual life, the cornerstone on which the body of Christ, the Church, is built upon today, and tomorrow, and forever. Built into this body, each and every one of us, to see and embrace **EVERYONE**.

**Epiphany is when the real work of Christ begins. Epiphany is when the REAL work of Christmas begins.**

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**Transformation is always a gift to be received and a gift to be given away.** Rising from the muddy waters of our post-election malaise, the Reverend William Barber II rose to the stage of our conscience as a result of his speech during the Democratic National Convention in August. His work and ministry in North Carolina has been present and powerful long before this moment of time, and continues onward.

His work is the work of a LIVING baptismal faith. His ministry is an Epiphany ministry, calling for a **moral revival and a New Year's Revolution** to ALL people of faith ... EVERYONE! For me, this call is incarnated by the words of the Reverend Dr. Howard Thurman ...

**"When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among people,  
To make music in the heart."**

When you come to the baptismal font this day, making the mark of these waters upon you again, look around and see, REALLY SEE, each and every person. We are one with each other as God's created, just as we are. REALLY SEE and join us in living and making real the words of our mission statement – **"Nourished at Christ's table and stepping forward in faith, WE ARE God's love ..."**

**Epiphany is when the real work of Christ begins. Epiphany is when the REAL work of Christmas begins.**

*AMEN*