

January 10, 2010

The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Growing in Faith

At the heart of the story of Jesus' baptism in all four gospels is the declaration that he is beloved of God. We don't know exactly what that experience was for Jesus—whether he became aware that he was loved during what was probably a ritual cleansing in preparation for a mighty act of God, or whether he knew himself loved over time and hindsight marked his baptism as a moment of particular awareness. What we know is that after his baptism Jesus began to live and act with a kind of clarity of purpose and willingness to risk. In time we know that he was able to do remarkable things and take remarkable risks because of this awareness of God's love for him. So much so that in the end he must have come to the conclusion in the Garden of Gethsemane that breaking faith with that love was a fate worse than death.

So it is for each of us as we begin to discover that we are really and truly beloved of God as is declared when each of us is baptized. We might be blessed with that awareness long before baptism or during the sacrament itself, but for many of us our ability to trust in God's grace and love is a lifelong task. Growing or being formed in Christian faith is really growing in trust for God's love. When we know ourselves loved we can face anything that comes our way in life.

Last week we heard a major presentation from the group that has been talking and praying about and for our future. They think of us as a worshipping community formed for Christian Faith through engaging God and our neighbors. We can and will be sorting out what that means for our mission and our priorities for years to come. At the very least it means that the heart of what we of and who we are is most manifest here around the Lord's Table. We are formed for Christian faith in many ways, most of which we do here: gathering around the table, hearing and responding to the story, remembering what really matters in life and in many and various ways choosing to engage people other than ourselves who might be in our won families or down the pew or across the world. Growing in faith is not always easy but it means growing in our ability to trust in God's love, and so growing in our capacity to face the challenges of life gracefully and generously and fearlessly.

That is the story of our parish over the years. We began as a Sunday school on the northern outskirts of the city telling the story of God's love. As the city grew, the outskirts became more like the center and that is where we were as the rumblings began around issues of race and people of color. We chose to engage rather than joining the white flight of so many of our friends and neighbors,

believing that engagement was the path by which we could both bear witness to the love that sustained our common life and learn more of that expansive love God has for all of creation. We are justly proud of our record during the civil rights movement with two of my predecessors signing the 'minister's manifesto' and our embrace of the concerns of brothers and sisters of color. It is easy for us to forget with the passing of time how very fraught with conflict were those days. Not everyone in the congregation was able or willing to take the risk of engagement. Not everyone was able or willing at that point in their lives to defend their church to friends who were making different decisions and taking a different view, even resisting the kinds of changes in society that we embraced. There were plenty of brothers and sisters who left for congregations and parts of town that they felt were safer for them and their families. But those who stayed learned something of God's love through engaging God in their neighbors. Many of those people are still among us. Their story is told in our history by Margaret Langford and if you have the privilege of hearing it from them I urge you to take the opportunity while you can.

Others of us have lived through other changes in church and state with the same kind of desire for justice, most recently the intense conversations here around the proper place of lesbian and gay people in the church. The move from toleration and 'don't ask, don't tell' to positive affirmation of our friends as children of God is far from over in church and state but largely behind us as a matter of heartache in this community of faith. You who were actively engaged here as little as six or seven years ago remember how hard it was to defend your church in the car pool line or the office even as you were working through your own thoughts and feelings. We saw friends make decisions that they believed were best for them and their families at the time and they left for places and parishes that did not choose to engage their neighbor down the pew in the same way. But we also heard testimony from the leaders of that day as to how honest conversation in the midst of real community led them to a change of heart and led them to grow in their ability to trust in God's abundant love.

As surely as Jesus was declared beloved in baptism so are all of us. And as much as Jesus was empowered to live with integrity even unto death in the assurance of that love, so can each of us.

This desire to be a community centered in worship and growing in faith through engaging God and our neighbors will continue to shape our ministries in the future as in the past. We will continue to choose what sometimes seems to be the harder way of looking always to increase our capacity to respond to challenge rather than simply seeking to ameliorate the symptoms of a hard life. That kind of priority was made manifest as Martha Sterne led us through letting go of our overnight shelter which we grew to see as palliative care—a band aid on a festering wound in our society—and moving to establish a ministry of life transformation for addicted and homeless men that is now the Covenant Community. Our ministry of clothing children with dignity is not simply about giving away clothes, but is a way of playing a part in letting our guests know

something of the reality of God's love so that they can begin to find their God-given gifts within themselves. We know that children perform better in school want they feel better about themselves. We offer them some possibility of trusting that they are loved so that they can discover their own God-given resources for life. Such are the consequences of knowing ourselves beloved. As it was for Jesus, declared beloved at his baptism, so also for us who seek to grow in our ability to trust God day by day and so grow in our capacity to meet the challenges of a life fully lived to the glory of God.

So, as ever, let us enjoy some silence to take this on board, today remembering and giving thanks for God's sustaining love. Let us respond to the gospel in silence and in prayer...