

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, January 8, 2023

The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Festal Evensong

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

on

Joshua 3:1-8, 14-end; Hebrews 1:1-12

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The Wonder of Baptism

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

I fear sometimes—well not sometimes, actually quite frequently—
I fear that we, that we the church, have a hard time leaning into wonder.
That we're suspicious of wonder. That we don't quite trust the wonderful.
We don't really know where to put it or what to do with it.
Often, we come up with ways to set it over to one side:
We figure out strategies to explain it away or ignore it.
And this is likely the case for any number of reasons we could go into,
From secularism to not-so-great catechesis
To thinking that science and religion are at opposite ends
Of some ridiculously inadequate epistemological spectrum
Whatever the reason...
We have a way of apologizing for "the substance of things hoped for,
The evidence of things not seen." (Heb. xi.1)
So wonder for us has become a source of discomfort and disruption.
Now, granted, that's not particularly new: it has always been thus.
What's new, I think, are the lengths the *church* will go to distance itself
From the discomfiting wonder that has founded it, that shapes it, that fulfills it.

So on this Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord
I want to revel with you, however briefly
In the gratuitous glorious *wonder* of the sacrament of Baptism,
Of which we're given little hidden glimpses in our readings this evening.
Often when folks talk about baptism these days, they talk about it as an initiatory rite:
The person being baptized becomes a member of the Church.
And that's not wrong—but too often talk of baptism ends there
And folks can get the impression that the Church is like a Club and Baptism gets you in.
The Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer goes a bit deeper:
"Holy Baptism," it says, "is the sacrament by which God adopts us
As his children and makes us members of Christ's Body,
The Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God."
Pause for a moment and consider that:

In baptism, we become, by a grace unearned but freely given:
Children of God, members of Christ's Body—we are oned with Christ—
And inheritors of God's eternal kingdom.

That

Is

Wonderful.

It is entirely a work of grace: a thing of supernatural majesty and awe.
And that's not all.

The waters of baptism are the waters
Over which the spirit of God hovered at the beginning of all things
And in the Church, through the baptismal font,
The Spirit is bringing forth a new creation, a new world patterned on Christ;
They're the waters of the flood on which humanity was buoyed up in Noah;
They're the waters of the Red Sea through which our ancestors in faith journeyed
In their pilgrimage from bondage in Egypt to freedom in the land of promise,
An image renewed and re-enacted in our reading from Joshua earlier,
And we are led, too, in baptism, through those waters from bondage to sin and death,
To the liberty of love's resurrection life;
The waters of baptism are the waters of the Jordan in which Jesus was baptized,
And here's the wonderfulness of this connection:
If in baptism we are oned with Christ, made members of his Body
Then our baptisms were present there in his baptism,
Our baptisms are an unfolding through all of space and time of his baptism,
And the voice he heard joyfully singing from heaven:
This is my Beloved child in whom I am pleased (Mat. iii.17)
Are, in him, and through him, said *of* us and *to* us as well.
In baptism, Jesus Christ, by the power of the Spirit,
Really and truly takes up residence in a human soul,
The King of Love's Eternal Glory enthroning himself in a human heart, in a human life,
Planting there a seed of grace which, nurtured through prayer, the practice of the faith,
Watered with the grace imparted in the other sacraments,
Especially Confession and the Eucharist,
Tended by Christ through the means of grace he provides for his body,
This seed can grow into a life that blossoms and flowers forth with all the virtues,
In righteousness and humility, and bears the fruits of repentance.
In baptism, we die to the world in, with and through Christ
And we live in, with and through Christ, to God.
The Cherub's flaming sword that guards the Tree of Life is extinguished in baptism's flood
And we find ourselves citizens of Paradise, standing at the foot of that Tree,
The Tree of the Cross,
From which our Lord and King reigns,
The Pattern of Death undone in us,
Washed away by the blood and water that flowed from his wounded side,
His own Pattern of Love alive in us.
In the waters of Baptism, we become sources of living water for the world
We become tributaries of the great river of grace that flows from the throne of God
To green the desert of this dying world.

Hopefully, all of that does indeed sound wonderful
And I can tell you that it is all the more wonderful for being true.
And you'd be within your rights to ask:

“If it is true, why is it so many Christian folks, baptized folks,
Why is it so many can be so horrible?
If all that is true, why is there still so much pain and suffering in the world?”
And you may well ask: “Why is there still death and sin in my life?”
It’s easy to forget that Baptism isn’t just a singular, powerfully wonderful event in a human life:
It inaugurates an ongoing process of transformation, the unfolding of grace,
The unfolding of wonder’s disruptive power to undo in us the patterns of sin and self
With which we are comfortable and in which we may not always know we are entangled.
The grace of baptism is nourished through askesis,
Through the discipline of prayer, through the practice of the faith,
Through recourse to the sacraments, through the life of the Church.
And if we refuse this practice, this discipline, this life,
Is it any wonder that the fruits of justice, of goodness, of gentleness, of faithfulness, of joy,
Of love...
Is it any wonder that they wither on the vine?
The work of faith, the work of renewal, the work of redemption,
The work of loving and serving others, is a work of grace with which we cooperate
But do not ourselves originate,
It begins with the uncomfortable task (again: the work of asceticism)
Of setting self aside to let grace—to let love—shine in and through us.

Our reading from Hebrews this evening speaks to this.
Jesus, it says, is the brightness of God’s glory, the express image of his person. (Heb. 1:3)
The human life of Jesus Christ—his birth, his teaching, his miracles, his passion, his death,
His resurrection, his ascension—perfectly expresses the shape of God’s life of love.
Now that phrase “express image” translates the Greek word *χαρακτήρ*
From which we get the word:
Character—the consistent patterns of thinking and behaving that express who we are.
But the Greek *χαρακτήρ* means something more like: the impression that a stamp makes;
Or the tool or scribe an engraver uses to engrave an image;
Or even the engraver himself in the act of engraving.
Too often, we believe that we’re the one doing the engraving.
We make ourselves. We do it ourselves. We form and forge ourselves.
We are the authors of our character. We make our own goodness.
We are the heroes of every story.
Beloved, the Church calls that sin. And it calls us to something new and discomfiting.
It calls us, in Baptism, to receive the character of the glory of God
Engraved on our hearts by the very Expression of that glory
Who once wrought our redemption on the cross
With the sharpness of thorn and spear and nail;
It calls us in baptism to the difficult, disruptive and discomfiting task,
Of allowing the Word of God to be the Scribe of God that will inscribe God in our lives:
The Word that in being sharp enough to separate soul from spirit (Heb. iv.12)
Is sharp enough to separate from us the weight of sin to which we cling so closely, (Heb. xii.1)
Gentle and gracious enough to engrave eternity’s glory on our finite mortal hearts.
For through Baptism, by grace, in Christ, that glory becomes a real possibility of the human.

The Church calls us to be baptized, yes (and if you’re hearing that call today,
I pray that you will reach out to me or any of the clergy here
To talk about getting baptized
At the Easter Vigil on April 8th)

The Church calls us to be baptized
...and it calls us to receive the grace to continue the work of baptism,
The work of the Author of our Faith, the Lord of Love, Jesus Christ,
To give us his own character, that the shape of Gods life may be perfectly expressed in us;
That our death may be undone and God's life may be ours;
That the birth, teaching, miracles, passion, death, resurrection, ascension of Jesus Christ,
Of Love Incarnate and Redeeming and Self-giving,
God's cruciform Glory,
May be revealed in us.

The Mystery, the Sacrament of Baptism is Wonderful.
Let us, by grace, through faith, lean in to the Wonder,
Consent to be disrupted and undone,
That we may more fully, more boldly, live that Wonder,
The Wonder of Love
To the greater Glory of God.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.