January 10th, 2021 • Baptism of the Lord • Renewal of Baptismal Vows • Online Worship

“Are to Dream: Layered Epiphanies”
Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

Mark 1:9-11
In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

There are times, I suppose, when the rhythms and rituals of the church year seem out of synch with our lives, or foreign to us, or we’re just not really “in the mood.” We go through the motions, anyway. Then again, there are times and seasons when the cycle turns and brings us back to just what we need right when we need it.

My sense is that this year’s service of Baptismal Renewal might just be one such moment, when the ritual anticipates the need, our need. After a long season of COVID and more to come, do we not all need to be renewed? Do we not long for the Holy Spirit to stoop low, take us by the hand, and lift us back to our feet? All the while whispering assurances of ever-present love and immeasurable strength…

After a day of shocking violence in our nation’s capitol, in the very heart of our cherished democracy, do we not long for a renewing of our civic life? A recommitment to one another, and to our better angels, and to the ideals for which we stand? Do we not long for the Spirit of the holy God to open our eyes and open our hearts through forgiveness, repentance, supplication, and reaffirmation of faith?

This service of baptismal renewal creates a moment for all that, and more. We remember that baptism is not a one-time thing. Not a one-and-done. It has been described as “Layers of Epiphanies,” an intriguing phrase that reminds us that God’s Spirit washes over us again and again and again throughout our lives—to heal, cleanse, renew and restore us. Remember that one of the meanings of the word “epiphany” is revelation. Sometimes epiphanies are lovely and restore within us a sense of the beauty and grace of life in the Spirit.

But sometimes epiphanies are sad, troubling, revealing to us things we’d rather not see or know. Sometimes epiphanies pull back the veil to reveal things about ourselves, about the world we live in, hard things, painful things. Last Wednesday was one such epiphany, a day that revealed ugly things about who we become when we give countenance to that which would tear down norms of decency and even threaten our democracy itself, when we stray far from God’s path of respect, liberty and justice for all.

Layers of epiphanies as we go through this life. Some beautiful, some painful, but all bringing the possibility of new life, fresh starts, recommitment to the things that make for peace, deeper resolve to take nothing for granted and never settle for less than what we know to be good and true and enduring.

The Spirit of the living God washes over us in the waters of baptism. Opening our eyes, opening our hearts, with the promise that new life, life made new, is always available to us through the love of our eternal, ever-present God. The vow and covenant we made or that was made on our behalf at our baptism is today reaffirmed. We remember who and whose we are. We remember that in this and every moment we are each and all beloved children of God. We are set free, in the words of St. Augustine, to “trust the past to God’s mercy, the present to God’s love, and the future to God’s providence.”

May God renew and convict us this day, that as this new year begins, we resolve to be the hope and to let God’s love flow through us, new life for each and every one of us, new life for our nation and world. Let us dare to dream.
People of God, join me now at the font of God's love:
Sisters and brothers in Christ:
Through the sacrament of baptism
God’s spirit has been poured out upon water,
Water that flows freely for all who will receive it,
Water from the streams of God’s saving power and justice,
Water that brings hope to all who search for righteousness,
Water that refreshes life, nurtures growth, and offers new birth.

Today we come to the waters,
to renew our commitments to Christ who has raised us,
the Spirit who has birthed us,
and the Creator who is making all things new.

Let these waters be to us drops of your mercy, O God,
Let these waters remind us of your righteousness and justice.
Let these waters renew in us the resurrection power of Jesus.
Let these waters make us long for your coming reign.