



January 8th, 2023 • Baptism of the Lord/Renewal of Baptismal Vows • In-Person and Online Worship

“The Magnitude of God’s Promise: From the Waters”

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

The leap each year from Epiphany to the Baptism of Jesus is always something of a shock to our awareness, isn’t it? For weeks, we’ve been basking in the stories of the birth of the Christ Child and today he has fast-forwarded into a young man, being baptized by John in the River Jordan. In the blink of any eye, many years have passed, but isn’t that how parents and grandparents describe their own children and grandchildren—a babe, a toddler, a teen, an adult.... moving at lightning speed through this wondrous experience of life?

And how blessed we are, all of us, to renew our baptismal vows this morning. This annual service gives us all the opportunity to pause again at the beginning of this New Year and focus on who we are—who we really are—who we hope to become—in the sight of God and as members of this community, the church. And it gives us a chance to remember that in our baptism, God calls us, each and every one, names us, claims us, gifts us, and empowers us to be the person God is creating us to be as a beloved child of God.

The wonderful author, Kathleen Norris, noted that, to the earliest Christians, the Baptism of Jesus—the story found in all four gospels—was as important as Christmas itself—important because it indicates “that the incarnation [God made flesh] is not only about Jesus [and what God is revealing to us in Jesus]—but about us...[it] demonstrates to Christians not only what God is like but also who God wishes us to be.”

And do we not all feel the need of renewal? 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...

We participate in a time of baptismal renewal to remember the significance of our baptism. We come to feel the water on our foreheads, the sign and the seal of God’s presence and power still in our lives, still available to us with just as much potency as ever, with just as much life-changing potential as ever.

In baptism, God claims us as God’s own—each of us—precious, beloved, entrusted, and upheld by God. In our baptism, God trusts us with the name “child of God” so that, knowing ourselves to be special and loved, we can share that love with all whom we meet. In our baptism, God sends the Holy

Spirit to anoint us with caring and compassion. In our baptism, God sends the Holy Spirit to empower us to spend our lives on others.

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. Our life in Christ 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, revelations that restore within us a sense of the beauty and grace and power of life in the Spirit.

God's ever-living Spirit 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.

God created each of us with an inherent desire to make a difference. Baptism is about who God is and who God wishes us to be in this world. About who God wishes us to be for this world. About the kind of person God creates us to be, a person who embodies, in our own way, in our own life, in our own family, in our own work, in our own circle of friends—a child of God who embodies the marks of the Kingdom. Compassion. Justice. Generosity. Caring. In our baptism, we are blessed to be a blessing. 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."

As we move towards baptismal renewal this morning, I'm going to first invite our ushers to come forward now to receive our tithes and offerings. This weekly giving of our financial gifts for the work of the church is a reminder of just how blessed we are and how much of ourselves we are called to give in return. And as the offering is received, I'd also like you to take out the index card that was in your OOW this morning and write on it clearly the name with which you were baptized, your Christian name, first and middle, and bring your card forward when you come in a few moments to renew your baptismal vows. The pastors will read from these, collect them in these baskets, and then place them all on the altar table this morning, as a symbol of the rededication of our lives to God this day. For those worshipping in-person today, feel free to wear a mask as you come forward if you are more comfortable doing so. If you're not comfortable coming forward, be sure to find the basket of baptismal shells in the narthex as you leave worship and take one with you. And if you're worshipping on-line, I invite you to simply dip your fingers into a bowl of water and touch your forehead, giving thanks and remembering your baptism.

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:

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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.