

First Sunday after the Epiphany  
The Baptism of our Lord  
January 11, 2009  
Genesis 1:1-5, Acts 19: 1-7; Mark 1:4-11

On Tuesday I had the opportunity to attend Street Church, an outdoor celebration of the Eucharist that takes place in Franklin Park in downtown Washington. After the service, lunch is provided for the area's homeless. These men and women spend the majority of their life outside - outside the warmth provided by four walls and a ceiling, outside the comforting arms of family, outside the circles of power and influence.

Before the service began, I spoke with one of the regular volunteers. He said he had been to lunch the day before at an exclusive club in Washington DC which overlooked Franklin Park. While he was sitting in a large comfortable leather chair, he thought ahead 24 hours to when he would be outside at Street Church, standing in the cold for over an hour. He compared the two contexts, naming the one extreme and the other absurd, realizing that either the exclusive club or the cold park could serve as the extreme or the absurd. In the span of 24 hours, this man, for a time, inhabited both realms.

“You shall know the truth,” Flannery O’Connor once wrote, “and the truth shall make you odd.” I believe that is an apt description of what transpires through our Baptism into the name of Jesus Christ. When we know the truth of our Baptism, we become odd, we believe odd things, we speak oddly, we act oddly and we reach out in odd ways.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes, “Most of what we do in worldly life is geared toward our staying dry, looking good, not going under. But in baptism, in lakes and rain and tanks and fonts, you agree to do something that's a little sloppy because at the same time it's also holy, and absurd. It's about surrender, giving in to all those things we can't control; it's a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get drenched.”

On Tuesday we gathered at Franklin Park – ready to celebrate the Eucharist and provide and claim spiritual and physical nourishment for and from all who gathered.

Now, I don't know if you remember, but it was pretty miserable on Tuesday and Wednesday. There was a bone-chilling rain that drenched our region mid-week. In Franklin Park on Tuesday afternoon the rain was not hard, but the drizzle was steady, messy, decidedly uncomfortable, and cold. Yet, there was a group of about 40 people who were willing to let go of balance and decorum and get drenched.

To gather outside in a park is a choice for those of us who sit in leather chairs at lunchtime. To gather outside in a park is a daily reality for others. Our baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, however, destines us all to gather together in this way.

To gather as a group of strangers, to greet one another in the promises of peace, and to share a meal together - seems a little odd for many of us, but – thanks be to God – it is one way we inhabit the truth of our adoption into the life and love of the triune God.

This love is so poignantly described in the heaven-splitting story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. Jesus enters the living water of the river, is plunged by John into the water, is held under, and then emerges from the water, likely gasping for air. Jesus takes his first breath, and takes into himself the Spirit of God which had swooped and descended upon him like a dove. He is both named and claimed by God. He is Beloved.

And, when we are baptized into the name of Jesus Christ, we too are named and claimed by God. And just as Jesus' baptism in the Jordan took place in the boundary between the wilderness and the promised land, so too does our baptism place us at the boundary between wandering and finding, between estrangement and reconciliation, between the extreme and the absurd, the safe and the risky, the club and the park, death and life.

In baptism we are plunged into the death of Jesus Christ and rise to share in His resurrection. We are born into a new identity, a new family, into the Body of Christ. In Baptism, we choose to do a very odd thing.

We choose to turn off the noise of our busy lives, and hear perhaps for the first time the divine love song. We choose to tune into the call of God, which is ever present, ever inviting, always longing, and always hopeful. We choose to say yes.

In a world that often turns from the spiritual to the material, we choose to turn to Jesus Christ. In a world that celebrates security and self-sufficiency, we choose to put our whole trust in Him. In a world inhabited by those who strive to get ahead and who love to question authority, we choose obedience to another.

Whether we choose these things as an adult – as Deborah has done – or we choose these things for our children, as was the case last week, we all take an active role in responding to God's love.

And, choosing to cross through the boundary between the wilderness and the Promised Land, between death and life, between holding on and letting go - through choosing to plunge into the waters and be buried with Christ so to rise up again drenched in God's love - we are bound to one another and to God forever.

In the passage from Acts, Paul comes upon some disciples in Ephesus who were unaware of the Holy Spirit, and thus the empowering grace bestowed on us in Baptism. If not into the name of Christ, Paul asks them, "Into what then were you baptized?"

They say that they were baptized into John's Baptism. And to be sure, this was not a bad thing. The baptism of repentance that John offered was good as far as it went.

But the incarnation of God through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ transformed the whole understanding of Baptism. We are not only cleansed from sin in Baptism we are born into new life, into the life of the love of the triune God – a love that was marked by Christ’s obedient life and ministry, his humiliating death on a cross, and his ultimate rising to the right hand of God.

“The church has claimed that Jesus underwent baptism so that we might commune with him in baptism and share his empowerment by the Spirit,” writes one professor of theology. “If our Baptism involves a participation in Jesus’ baptism, and if Jesus’ baptism initiates his ministry of suffering obedience, then our baptism must include a similar acceptance of self denial. The path that baptism opens is a road typified by bearing one’s own cross, and of saving one’s life only by losing it (Lee Barret in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, p 240).”

The path is marked by a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get drenched. The path leads us to become odd, to believe odd things, to speak oddly, to act oddly and to reach out in odd ways – whether in a cold and drizzly park in downtown Washington or in the cold and chilly halls of some of our schools, workplaces, and homes.

We speak, act and reach out empowered by the gift of the Holy Spirit given to us in Baptism, bound up in the mystery, the grace, the infinite love of God.

Today’s passage from Genesis describes the first day of creation: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

Soon the waters of Baptism will be blessed in this church, God will sweep over the face of these waters. Deborah will be baptized into that water, into the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

She will be born again, and there will be evening and morning, her first day.

Amen.