

On Christmas Eve, I talked about the bubble we seem to put the Holy Family into each year. We want the image of Christmas to be of loving parents peering into the eyes of their newborn while the snow softly wafts down from the sky. In reality, giving birth in a cave full of sheep and goat poop is hardly what we want to put on our fireplace mantles.

The lessons leading us to the baptism of Jesus by John feel like a call to examine what bubble the church often puts baptism into. Think about it. Baptism is an event where we welcome a newborn or very young child (usually) into the church family. There's a cake. There's a white christening gown. There's a party. There is much rejoicing. There should be! Baptism days are times to rejoice.

We should rejoice, but we should also understand the seriousness of this sacrament.

Baptism is not something that needs to 'get done'. It is an invitation into a life where your primary focus is your relationship with God.

Baptism has been different in different places in our faith history. The baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist is different from the baptism done by the apostles. That baptism is different from what we do in the church today. The ritual bathing is to rid the bather of all impurities – especially those impurities that keep them from recognizing the sovereignty of God.

The apostles may have been baptized by John after being called by Jesus. Or, perhaps Jesus did the honor himself. We don't know. In any case, the Jewish tradition of penitence and purification informed those rites. This week's reading from the Acts of the Apostles note that many early Christians were baptized only in the name of Jesus, leaving the Holy Spirit dangling somewhere in mid-air ready to be called down where needed and necessary. That's where we get to our current practice of this rite.

Baptism is . . .

Where the Holy Spirit comes into Christian theology. In Luke's gospel – a gospel that focuses on social justice – the dove personifies the Spirit descending upon Jesus. This would have seared the ears of those who first heard this gospel aloud. The rulers were always symbolized by eagles – birds of prey – who, in their

majestic beauty, could swoop down and eat you as easily as it could dazzle you.

Doves are nothing if not vulnerable. Baptism points up the vulnerability of being a Christian and our reliance on the Holy Spirit for comfort and relief.

Baptism is . . .

The acknowledgement of the intimate relationship God wants with us. Isaiah reminds the newly freed exiles that they need not fear God. God is their Creator. God knows them by name. God is with them. Baptism is a naming rite. In fact, early Episcopal liturgies ask the parents and godparents to “name this child”. Of course, the parents already have, so that piece of the baptismal liturgy is redundant. But, we shouldn’t forget what a responsibility it is to name someone.

Because God wishes to have an intimate relationship with us, baptism assures us that we will not be alone through fire or high water. Please note – baptism does not mean that we will live a life without fire or high water. It reminds us that we won’t be alone when it happens. Please note the difference. Under no circumstances does believing in God and being baptized guarantee us a life of luxury. It’s often quite the opposite. (See above note regarding doves and eagles.)

Baptism is . . .

Proclaiming that God is God and we are not God. In fact, we're not even close. It is from God that blessings come. It is from God that we get our strength. This may be a difficult concept to grasp. Especially, if we've been led to believe that it is our work alone that gets us to where we are in this world.

This is especially true in the lands of Affluenza. Inhabitants of that land want to believe that they've worked themselves up to their heights. If deeper examination is done, however, inhabitants of that land will find that the heights they've found themselves on have been reached thanks to millennia of abuse of enslaved people; decades of social situations dictated by fear, miscommunication, and mistrust; and more than just a few days of dumb luck.

Baptism is . . .

Affirmation that all human beings are created by God, loved by God, and to be respected and cared for by those who are baptized. In it we acknowledge that simply saying we believe in God is not enough. It means that our entire life needs to be led in a way that transforms not only ourselves, but also the world.

This rite of penitence, purification, and blessing is not a one-off. The promises are impossible to uphold alone. The good news is that we have our entire life, with God's help, to work toward it.

We are about to renew these promises once again. As your spiritual leader I bid you to consider how you will take them out of church today and into the world tomorrow. After we renew the Baptismal Covenant, we continue with the Prayers of the People. Especially today, I ask you for special intentions in your prayers.

Pray for those who, though they say that they are Christians, do not act in accordance with these promises. Pray for those who struggle to keep them. Pray for those who are preparing to be baptized. Pray for this congregation, those who are present and those who are absent, that we might enter this new year resolved to uphold our promises in ways that bring healing and health to those who are near us. Amen.