

# *As Many as Have Been Baptized into Christ*

A Sermon by The Rev. Robbin Del Nagro

*Epiphany 1A; Matthew 3:13-17; 1/8/17*

Eleven years ago, at the Easter Great Vigil, in my seminary field education church, I assisted at the baptism of my two grandsons, Drew, who was four, and Dylan, who was one. It was a wonderful evening when everyone got to stay up late. They went home and immediately to bed. But the next morning when they were in the bathtub Drew became agitated when his mom tried to wash his face and head. “No, he cried. Don’t wash off my baptism!”

Isn’t it wonderful that our baptism doesn’t wash off? We are marked as Christ’s own forever just as if we had received a permanent tattoo that says, “you belong.” You have a new identity, a new life with a particular purpose. We wonder why kids today want tattoos. A tattoo is a way of saying, “this is who I am.” Baptism, though not visible in the same way, says the same thing, “This is who I am.” Baptism is in many ways a rite of passage. We say certain words and perform certain actions that ritually tell the story of a journey of transition from one way of being to another. In baptism we die with Christ and with him we are raised to life anew. The sacrament of baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

A rite of passage helps us to cross a threshold; to say good bye to an old way of being and embrace a new way of being. The primary symbol that we use is water. Water is crucial to creation and it is crucial to us as embodied human beings who need water to survive. We are given the beautiful image in scripture of the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters of chaos and bringing order. Through water the Israelites escaped from bondage and made it safely to freedom. Water was the great force that swallowed up the pursuing Egyptians. Jesus gave us the image of streams of flowing water that live within us, never running dry. At the muddy waters of the Jordon river, Jesus came forward to be baptized by John. Into the waters we sink down, down, down, and come back up as new creations.

Baptism is the beginning of a new life that never ends. Our formation as Christians is a process that continues until our death. Today we celebrate six precious lives that are about to begin that process. But the process is not just a singular, individual one. The process of becoming more than we could ever ask or imagine takes place in community. You will make promises today to participate in teaching these six children about God's love. You will promise to be the community that nurtures them in the faith, that forms them and provides fertile soil for them to grow into mature Christian adults. In Christian

community we are formed as people who are capable of witnessing to God's truth in the world. We are formed through our liturgy, through our prayers, our music, our proclamation of the gospel, our study of scripture, and particularly in the sacrament of communion that takes us out of our individual, diverse selves and pulls us together into one entity. We are formed through our service; on committees, in leadership roles, and when we reach out our hands to serve the larger lakeside community.

Baptism marks our full inclusion in a community which is the Body of Christ in this world, with all of the benefits of belonging, such as receiving communion, which all of these six new members are entitled to. We used to think we had to wait until confirmation to receive the eucharist, but that is old theology. Today we understand that communion is available at the time of baptism. In this community both the poor and the rich belong. Both the educated and uneducated belong. It doesn't matter if your skin is white or black or some hue inbetween. It doesn't matter if you only speak English or Spanish or some other language. It doesn't matter if you are straight or gay or bi; 95 years old or two. In this community everybody matters, everybody belongs who wants to belong.

But being a member of the Body of Christ also comes with all of the responsibilities of belonging to a community. In your baptism you were empowered by the Holy Spirit for ministry and you are expected to exercise that ministry in some way. Over the next eight to ten weeks we are going to recognize the various ways that we do ministry by blessing, commissioning, and thanking those who serve on various committees and groups. As we do this our identity as baptized Christians will begin to take shape within us. And as we see our identity more clearly we will begin to recognize the shape and form of our communal identity as well.

We hear about a community in our reading from Isaiah today. This community had their own unique identity; they were a community in spiritual desolation. They lived daily with the shame of having been defeated by a foreign power. They were demoralized and cut off from the stories that told them who they were. God's promises to them seemed to be only distant dreams incapable of ever finding fulfillment. Into this community came Isaiah with his poetry and God's vision for them. He held this vision up for them and he stood with them, in the space where their center used to be. He stood with them until they could figure out just who they were, because they had forgotten. He stood there with them and he held out a mirror.

The 1994 movie, “The Lion King”, is the story of the young lion, the young lion, Simba, who has been chosen to succeed his father as the Lion King. There is a scene where Simba is called back to the lagoon where the shamen, Rafiki, wants to show him his father. Simba looks into the waters of the lagoon and sees there, not his father, but a reflection of himself. “Look harder,” Rafiki says. “He lives in you.” And when Simba looks again he hears the voice of his father saying: “Simba, you have forgotten who you are. You are more than you have become. Remember who you are.”

As Jesus came up, out of the waters of baptism, he heard his father’s voice. It said, “This is my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” And when he heard that voice he remembered who he was.

As we reaffirm our baptismal vows this morning, remember your baptism. Remember the day that you crossed the threshold from death to life, from bondage to freedom, from chaos to order. Remember the new creation that is you. Remember the community into which you were initiated. Remember the community in which you now belong. You are a reflection of the Christ within you. You are a light to the nations. Remember who you are. Amen.