

***A sermon preached by the Rt. Rev. Mark Hollingsworth, Jr., Bishop of Ohio
January 9, 2011 at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights***

The Baptism of Our Lord

Good morning. It is a privilege to be with you for this service of Eucharist, Confirmation, and Reception. First of all, I want to thank you. Thank you for your companionship these last seven years. Thank you for participating actively at Diocesan Conventions, Winter Convocations, and other events of the larger church; for raising up leaders to serve on diocesan committees and commissions; for encouraging and supporting candidates for ordination and the newly ordained; for paying your diocesan assessment; for the continuing generosity of many of you in the Bishop's Appeal; for communicating with me about the things that are important to you in the church and the things you believe we should be doing as the body of Christ in the world. Your contributions in these and countless other ways give me direction and encouragement that are indispensable to my serving you as bishop. And on a very personal note, thank you for being a parish home for my wife and family. When I leave early Sunday mornings to travel across the diocese on my parish visitations, it means a great deal to me to know that they will be here with you, embraced and supported by friends and spiritual companions who know them not for their relationship to me but as themselves. For all of these things I am extremely grateful.

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, recalling his immersion in the Jordan River at the hands of John the Baptist and remembering how the Word, hovering over the water as in the Creation, proclaimed him God's own child, the beloved in whom God delights. We hear the story and associate his baptism with our own, believing that the spirit of holiness that descended upon him like a dove falls also on us and *inspires* us, literally puts in us the spirit of godliness that is in him. Yet at the 9 o'clock service this morning when we baptized Jaden Mitchener, while we made reference to Jesus' baptism during the prayer of thanksgiving for the gift of water, Jaden was not baptized into Jesus' baptism, rather into Jesus' death and resurrection. You know the words of the prayer, "We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection, through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit."

So what is the connection between Jesus' baptism and ours? And if Jesus is God incarnate, God in the flesh, why does he need the ritual purification of baptism, anyway; from what sin does he need to be cleansed? For that matter, from what sins does eighteen-month-old Jaden need to be cleansed this morning? What, he's a messy eater, makes a little noise in church, and is occasionally demanding? I know adults who fit that description.

Many years ago, very early in my wife Sue's and my relationship, we spent a week after Christmas in Paris. It was BC – before children. The weather was quite typical for that time of year – some sun, some rain, and quite chilly. On Sunday morning we

went to church at the American Cathedral and then wandered through the city looking for a place for lunch. It had been raining on and off during the night and morning, so much so that the awnings over shop windows had pooled with rainwater. It was very blustery, with the late December wind blowing isolated banks of clouds across the sky. One minute it was sunny and the next quite dark, but when we left the cathedral the sun was shining, so I put on my sunglasses. Even though the sun would disappear from time to time, I left them on since they were prescription glasses and it was too difficult to keep digging through layers of clothing to switch them. (It was also BC – before contacts for me.) In spite of being windy, chilly, and a little damp, we walked the narrow streets, Sue under the occasional awning and me on the outside in a gentlemanly kind of way.

Finally, the clouds really blew in and the sky got very dark, and after a while Sue asked me why I was still wearing my sunglasses. My cheerful response, I regret to report, was something like, “When you’re cool, the sun is always shining.” As the words left my lips, a great gust of wind, biblical in proportion and perhaps intention, blew up under the awning under which Sue was safely walking and deposited gallons of frigid rainwater directly on top of me, washing away any semblance of cool that I had imagined myself to be. They washed away who I was not, and left who I really was: cold, perhaps, but decidedly not cool, and a young man in love with an apparently very tolerant woman.

I imagine that when Jesus emerged from the Jordan River, in the eyes of those present the waters of his baptism had washed away who he was not. As the spirit descended on him and the voice from above proclaimed, “This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I delight,” they saw that he was not what they expected. Doubtless they were reminded of Isaiah’s words to the Babylonian exiles, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” Yet standing there before them, he was clearly not what they might have imagined the messianic savior to be. He was not royalty. He had no economic power. He was neither a governmental nor a military leader. He was not an agent of earthly power. He was not what they had projected onto the image of Isaiah’s messiah.

After all that he was not was washed away, Jesus was as God alone saw him. Beloved. Pleasing. Delightful. And those present saw that he was like them, human. And he was loving, just, truthful, powerless by worldly economies and yet able to save the world. Without all that he was not, he was enough for God; indeed he was God.

Likewise do the waters of baptism wash away who we are not. In baptizing Jaden Michael Mitchener today, we are claiming that throughout his life, the waters of baptism can and will wash away all that he is not. We are claiming that he is not what we may want him to be, but what God has made him to be. We are claiming that he is not anything we may project onto him, or what society may project onto him, or even what he may project on himself, but what God imagines him to be. And

we are promising that we will be here for him, wherever he is from now on, to encourage and support him in becoming only and all of what God knows him to be.

There is not much, I suspect, that God can do with those things that we are not, but what God can do with who we truly are is nothing short of miraculous. I, for example, am not a successful drinker. There was little God could do with the illusion that I had control over alcohol. But what God could do when that illusion was washed away and I accepted that I am an alcoholic has been beyond my greatest imagining.

And so it is, in one way or another, for you. The waters of baptism wash away all that you are not, so that, unimpeded by those things, you are connected intimately with the God who has created you in love. You are not subject to evil and death. Because God loves you, they have no power over you. The resurrection of Jesus into which you were baptized resolves that once and for all. You are not what others project onto you or what they need you to be. You are neither your fears nor your fantasies. You are not your failures, not those things you are ashamed of, not your resentments, not your regrets, because the waters of baptism wash all of those things away, not just once, but over and over and over again. You are rarely what others think of you, both good and bad. Nor are you what you want others to think of you. You are what God knows you to be, not more and not less, and that is what God needs you to be for God to heal the world.

What you are is this. You are beloved. You are good enough. You are able to be what God dreams for you to be, or God wouldn't be dreaming it. That is what it means to be created in the image of God. Regardless of everyone else's expectations, you are capable of doing all that *God* needs you to do. You are holy. You are the Body of Christ, and into your ear God says, "You are my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." There are no exceptions. Ever.

The vows of the Baptismal Covenant we will renew in just a minute say nothing about living up to the expectations of others or being cool or having possessions or being in charge. They say nothing about living with guilt about things we regret, nothing about being convinced of our own inadequacy or pretending to be more than we know we are. Rather, they have to do with being genuinely the person God knows us to be, the person God loves and through whom God wants to love the world.

They have to do with saying our prayers, both privately and together, saying the things God already knows about us, the burdens and joys God wants always to share with us: "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?" They have to do with letting go of those things that keep us from one another and from God: "Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?" They have to do with assuring everyone else of God's love, by the things we say and the way we act: "Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?" They have to

do with making room in our lives and in ourselves for others, particularly for those whose differences are most difficult for us, because the other being always Jesus, it is especially through them that Jesus comes to us to make us whole: "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" And they have to do with putting ourselves on the line for others, with no exceptions: "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?"

Indeed, they have to do with being just what is left when the waters of baptism wash away all that we are not. They have to do with being God's own. Listen carefully, with the ears of your heart. The Word is alive and it is saying to you, "You are my precious child, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

Amen.

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