

**First Sunday of Epiphany, Year A**  
**Isaiah 42:1-9**  
**Psalm 29**  
**Acts 10: 34-43**  
**Matthew 3:13-17**

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

Today, in Hebron, New Hampshire, my very dear niece-in-law, Lindsay, will be baptized. Then she and her husband, Voss, will join Union Congregational Church as members. This is a very important day!

Adult baptism is less common today than it was 100 years ago. It's often connected with another sacrament, such as marriage or confirmation. I'm remembering that great scene in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, where Ian gets baptized, so that he and Toula can be married in the Greek Orthodox Church.

There are other reasons why adults may be baptized. It may be that they have met Jesus in prayer or desperation. Or perhaps, like Lindsay, they have experienced a congregation where deep peace and friendship in the name of Jesus are palpable, and they want to join that community. Others want to make a new start in their lives – to change the ground rules, and begin a life that is focused on love and forgiveness.

The medieval and Reformation understanding of baptism is that it is an essential step toward salvation – the prevention of our souls from going to

hell and the promise of entrance into heaven. Nowadays, many of us question those ancient notions of demons and fire that Dante so vividly described in The Inferno. We understand God's eternal love as the bulwark we cling to as our sure defense, and try to live our lives in accordance with.

Yet another way of looking at baptism is that it is an opening of extraordinary power to the gifts of the Holy Spirit – those amazing gifts of ministry and grace that are given to us to serve and care for others. I know that my niece, who is a pediatric intensive care nurse, has the gift of healing. I wonder what other gifts and ministries will awaken in her life as a result of her opening her soul to God's Spirit.

Quick aside: If you are interested in discovering your spiritual gifts, there will be a workshop at St. Thomas' Church just up Bethlehem Pike, this coming Saturday, from 9 to noon, led by the Rev. Frank Allen, Rector of St. David's Church. There are information sheets in the narthex.

Returning to the sacrament of baptism, we just mused on some good reasons why adults may seek baptism nowadays.

Why did Jesus do it?

He can't have been worried about salvation or the forgiveness of his sins – if he ever had any, I suspect they were pretty minor human ones. But he did need to make a new start. His public ministry was about to begin.

And he did join a community – of those hundreds of people his cousin John had baptized. And he did open himself to the action of God's Spirit. He was willing to be led into the desert and meet his destiny.

So Jesus was baptized. And the story of his adult ministry began. Over the course of the next several weeks, as we experience the part of the church year called Epiphany, we will hear about Jesus growing into his new identity, as prophet and teacher. We will hear why the Gospels were written, about Jesus and his extraordinary spiritual gifts through the Holy Spirit.

Peter says in our New Testament reading this morning, that Jesus “went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed.”

Perhaps Isaiah's vision of who Jesus would be after he let God's Spirit into his soul after baptism, gives us God's vision of his ministry;

*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....He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.*

We hear in Matthew's gospel today that when Jesus had been baptized, when he came up out of the waters of the Jordan River,

*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.”*

In this splendid moment all three persons of God's Trinity are present: God is completely present for one shining and eternal instant. At Jesus' baptism! Perhaps that is a reason why Jesus sought baptism – because he knew that it is an instance of Love's desire for wholeness, for completion, for unity. And that moment of the fullness of God's love was like a cosmic seed planted in Jesus' heart. After that, the miracles began

What is our baptism? What is this precious sacrament that we share with Jesus? How can we humans with our limited understanding of the largeness and grandeur of God's love begin to comprehend the good work done in our souls and in God's church when a person is baptized?

Our Prayer Book, on page 858, has several questions and answers about Baptism in the Catechism section. I want to focus on two of them:

Q. What is Holy Baptism?

A. Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God.

Q. What is the inward and spiritual grace in Baptism?

A. The inward and spiritual grace in Baptism is union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God's family the Church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit.

Did I mention Wow?

You know, we who have been baptized as infants sometimes forget we have a member's key to the kingdom of heaven. We hear the words of the sacrament of baptism when we gather to baptize an infant, and we miss the fact that these promises are also ours.

We are the children of God. We are members of Christ's body, the Church. We have union with Christ in his death and resurrection. We have been reborn into God's family, the Church. Our sins are forgiven. We have continuing new life in the Holy Spirit. And the same cosmic seed of the fullness of God's love is planted in our own hearts at our baptism.

What would happen if we let ourselves feel who we really are? What if over the next few weeks, you took out your Prayer Book and let yourself sink into the beauty of the gifts of your baptism? Think about each phrase. What dawning reality about your life as a Christian might happen? What miracles of grace, kindness, and care are there for you to perform?

If you are not yet baptized, consider this a glorious invitation. And if you are, consider that this is all already yours.

*Amen.*