

First Sunday after the Epiphany Baptism of our Lord 2021

Genesis 1:1-5, Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11, Psalm 29

(+) May the Word of the Lord be on my minds, on my lips, and in my heart to help me magnify God's holy name.

I start this sermon with that ancient prayer asking God's grace to guide my thoughts, my words, and my heart this morning so I might say something that will help guide you through the darkness of our present world; and that will give you hope and divine revelation on the ever-unfolding nightmare we keep finding ourselves in. Every week we seem surprised that what we didn't think could get any worse, gets worse.

Like all of you, I find myself bewildered by everything going on in our world. I found myself writing this sermon, thinking "what can I possibly say? We've heard so many speeches, read so many articles, looked at so many online postings, listened to so many friends as they all try and help us process everything that keeps happening. What can I possibly say that hasn't already been said more elegantly than what I have to say? Thus, I trace a cross on my mind, on my lips, and over my heart begging for Grace to understand, and inspiration to magnify God, to make God's voice bigger than the loud and noisy voices trying to out-shout God with messages that teach very bad things that lead to death. Words have tremendous power, saying wicked things like "you have a show strength and power not weakness."

On the Feast of Epiphany, remarkably, we celebrated the very opposite of what evil King Herod said in all his lies and false humility and death. God became a weak and defenseless infant, not a political tyrant. The Magi-leaders and rulers of foreign countries journeyed to meet the infant king lying on a food bowl manger. They brought gold, incense and embalming fluid to a baby shower, knowing the evil powers and leaders of this world would kill and destroy even God. The shadow of the cross fell across the whole life of Jesus from the manger to Golgotha. But Jesus' death brought us eternal life. King Herod's promise of a good life brought death to many, especially the innocent, weak, and loving.

We're about to hear the most familiar words of the Book of Genesis about God creating our world out of a formless void of chaos and pure darkness. And then a wind came over the waters in the darkness. God breathed on creation and creating light, making a distinction between night and day. God's word was breathed into the dark chaos.

As Psalm 29 tells us, it is a powerful voice of God, a voice of splendor, shaking creation, a voice of power. Upon the waters of death, darkness and chaos.

Like the Magi, we hear that divine voice calling us to be citizens of a different country, a kingdom of God and we hear God pleading with us to obey the commands of a different king, not with threats of violence or insurrection or a battle cry to dominate the weak and

marginalized. God's voice builds up the lowly. God's voice speaks in that "still, small voice of calm" all the more powerful for its gentleness and calmness, bringing light out of the darkness.

The sweet Breath of God, sweet because there is no decay in God's mouth, only life and spirit breathing life into dead chaos.

Today, we celebrate the strange feast of the Baptism of God. It's weird, feast to celebrate. According to our calendars, God has just been born at Christmas, and now the one who is without sin is washed in baptism of repentance for sins God could never have committed.

But there are secrets hidden for us in this strange baptism. This Baptism of God is the beginning of a Jesus active ministry, his serving of us and our world. He has a choice to make and Jesus chooses to help others rather than himself. And suddenly, we hear the voice of God speaking through the loud speaker for everyone to hear "This is God – Listen to Him."

It's the beginning of Jesus being of Use. Baptism is something we do to start a lifetime of imitating Jesus. We go down into a watery grave, we die to our old life of decay and sin and we rise up, resurrected in a new way of living, a new and different life of seeing God in each other.

It all has to do with imitation of a lifetime of trying to be like Christ who became like us. God meets that desire in us with unimaginable grace to help us be more like himself.

Baptism is the first step of a lifelong pilgrimage of becoming more like God.

God could so easily throw our sinfulness in our face. Just look at the hateful ugliness of our violence, our white privilege, our wicked conniving like at the capitol this past week. God could so easily and justifiably point out our un-Christlikeness.

Jesus stands on the banks of the Jordan River watching us and has a major choice to make. He could just walk away disgusted by humans and leave us to our own devices. God could just shake his head at us and go back to heaven and put back on his robes of splendor. This is the moment when God decides, standing, watching us in the River Jordan. He decides not to throw it all back in our faces. Instead, he's going to face the moment, and decide to be of use. He's not going to stand on the edge of the water with everyone looking at him and say "I don't need to be baptized, You all do!"

No. He lays aside his dignity that justifiedness and gets into the murky waters with us. He gets baptized just like us. Then the voice from Heaven "tears heaven apart" a theophany says "you chose to be of use, you are like me, with you I am well pleased."

Jesus took the chaos of being human and breathed life into it and made us Gods. By stooping down, he elevated us and what we must do is listen to him. We must imitate him in everything we do.

It all begins in Baptism for him and for us.

This morning, after we listen to the voice of God in the Holy Scripture, we will then renew our vows of Baptism, our way of imitating Christ in our lives. We will be of use like Christ. We will help bring order out of the chaos by our choice to step into the murky waters of sins washed

away. We will promise and vow again to continue in the Apostle's teachings; We will resist the evils of this world. We will promise again, by word and example that Christ's way is our way, seeking and serving God in every person, loving them and ourselves as reflections of God. Striving in every possible way to bring justice and peace, not violence and domination to all people, respecting and showing reverence to the dignity of every human being. It may seem hard and it really is, but that's why our response is "I want to, but it's too big, it's too impossible unless I have God's help and grace. Only with that can we honestly answer "I will, with God's help."