

First Sunday after the Epiphany 2020, Year A  
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC  
January 12, 2020  
Rev. Catherine L. Tatem

Isaiah 42:1-9   Psalm 29   Acts 10:34-43   Matthew 3:13-17

The vestry of The Church of the Redeemer has returned from a soggy and productive retreat. The rains in Kanuga did not dampen our spirits. We looked at the role of a vestry, reviewed Redeemer's annual financial budget, signed up for committees and commissions, and shared time together. This retreat was the first time that the vestry elected in December met; it was, in part, a "getting to know you" meeting. We will see the initiatives and fruits of this gathering in the coming weeks and months – this is an exciting time!

We began the retreat with a poem by Howard Thurman:

"The Work of Christmas"  
When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and the princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among brothers,  
To make music in the heart.

In a way, the vestry's work was framed by this poem. As spiritual leaders of the congregation, the vestry also has a call to work with many areas of church life. We are a new group to one another and to the congregation, embarking on a new life together, beginning and building on the many strengths of this congregation. The work of Christmas is alive and well at The Church of the Redeemer.

Today is a new day, and we celebrate Jesus' baptism. Just two weeks ago we met the baby Jesus, then the wise men arrived ... and all of a sudden, Jesus is 30 years

old and seeking out John the baptizer at the Jordan River. The event of Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. (The years between his birth and baptism are mostly an unknown, a mystery.)

Back to the Jordan River – John is reluctant to baptize Jesus, and in at least one version of the bible, Jesus' reply is quite simple. “Do it.” What a refreshing interpretation! “Do it, John. Baptize me.” John gives in, and does it; he baptizes Jesus. Matthew writes that Jesus is baptized “to fulfill all righteousness;” in simplified words, Jesus is baptized because “this is what God really wants.” Jesus' baptism completes a specific will of God; it is a specific task completed. God offers the sacrament of baptism; John and Jesus model saying “yes” to God's will.

When Jesus comes out of the waters of baptism, the heavens are “ripped open.” Heaven is no longer closed off beyond the clouds, but open to us, to humankind. The kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus; there is no barrier between God's realm in heaven and on earth. Immanuel, God-with-us, is still here, and we are living in God's kingdom.

Matthew indicates that God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all present at Jesus' baptism, and at ours:

The descent of the Holy Spirit marks the giving of all the gifts that Jesus will need in his ministry. We receive those same gifts of the Holy Spirit at our baptism. We have a call to bring people to Christ in and with our lives.

God's Son is a royal title. We know from it that Jesus the Messiah has come. He has been with us – we remember Immanuel, God-with-us – who was born in Bethlehem. Well, here he is, beginning a very public ministry.

The booming voice is God's. God pronounces Jesus to be God's son. All are present: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Martin Luther, in the year 1534, describes baptism in this way:

Without doubt, in baptism we get God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and all the angels! So, it is no longer “plain water,” but water in which the Son of God bathes, over which the Holy Spirit hovers, over which God the Father preaches. ... This is still true today. When I baptize “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” then today also are present the Son, who sanctified baptism with his body, the Holy Spirit, who sanctified it with his presence, and the Father, who sanctified it with his voice.... all of heaven is present .... God and all the angels show up on their own.

God show up at baptisms today, pouring out God's grace in water and the Holy Spirit. Once baptized, you are a full member of Christ's body, the church. It is a new day. We join in this new day and begin the work of Christmas. Take a moment and think about the gifts of baptism: God and all the angels show up for **you** and claim you as God's own, forever. God has poured upon you the gifts of the spirit. You have been cleansed for the start of your new life. You carry with you a name: God's beloved, and a characteristic, a quality: God is pleased with you! (and with me!) All present join in the baptism as we repeat our baptismal vows. We promise to bring you up in the way of Christ.

The way of Christ. It is as if Jesus pulls back the curtain to heaven and says "Here is what my ministry looks like. Come with me." Would we enter into Jesus' life – death – resurrection? While we are not called to be Jesus – there is and was only one Jesus, we have accepted a journey with Jesus. The task of our baptismal life is to figure out what gifts we have: what gifts of the spirit, gifts of the body of Christ, and to put those gifts to use in God's kingdom and to God's glory. We are responding to all that God has given us: God's love and grace, the presence of God's kingdom at work in this world, and our status as God's beloved children. How does it feel to be so loved that every day God wants to be in your presence, your body, your walk in the world? God is with you at work, home, here, ... everywhere. Bask in that love. Let God's love empower you to join in every new day as if it were your baptism day. None of those gifts has gone away.

From here, beloved, join in this new day, join the vestry and with one another and begin the work of Christmas: Find the lost, heal the broken, feed the hungry, release the prisoner, rebuild the nations, bring peace among brothers, make music in the heart. Do these things in the name of Christ and to the glory of God.  
Amen!