

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Baptism of our Lord
January 11, 2015
Sermon by Seminarian John Shirley

Here we are, January 11th – the Christmas festivities have ended; even the Church, the last defense of maintaining the 12 days of Christmas has deemed it time to move onto a new liturgical season. We have also passed the threshold of greeting each other with, “Happy New Year,” and from what I have heard, New Year’s resolutions are usually on the waning end. With all of the seasonal celebrations over, here we sit, in some cases content and grateful and in other cases looking at the beginnings of new year with fear, sadness and trepidation. BUT regardless of where we fall in this spectrum, we utilize this time as the beginning of “newness.” Many of us, myself included, no doubt have goals and plans for 2015, but we are also aware that, as plans usually go, something will change; sometimes these are good and sometimes these are bad, but normally they require a rerouting or reworking of plans. After all, we ARE in the BEGINNING of something NEW!!!

Today our two our lessons begin us in “newness.” I confess that I struggled to reconcile this lectionary cycle with the reality that the Church begins its New Year with the first Sunday in Advent; however, the readings are appropriate to where most of us are in our lives – just inside the doorstep of a New Year and perhaps not completely sure where we should from here.

Our Gospel reading from St. Mark has John baptizing folks in the wilderness, and, while baptizing, John was proclaiming: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Of course, we know that he was proclaiming Jesus, BUT his hearers most likely did not know or suspect this. To make this even more vague, when we read about Jesus’ own baptism, Mark writes, “. . . Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” The term that I want us to dwell on is “he.” According to Mark, the events that take place during Jesus’ baptism are only noticed by him, and even the voice from heaven is only heard by Him, “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Jesus as messiah and savior is still not a well a known fact, and, in Mark’s Gospel, this is where it BEGINS! We the hearers are given a few words from the John the Baptist about some ambiguous important figure, and then we are led into Jesus’ baptism, where his divine sonship is only revealed, or reaffirmed, to him. So, we begin in secret (as an aside, I encourage you to follow closely the Sunday readings, as we move forward in Mark, to see how this secret continues, throughout the life of Christ). This secret begs the question of us – do we begin in secret? Do we begin, and move forward, with the secret affirmation of our own role as God’s children? Are we willing to let God unfold the secret as our individual and collective journeys move forward?

Our Old Testament lesson from Genesis begins at the VERY beginning! We hear of God creating the heavens and the earth, and then we hear there was darkness. At this point God says “Let there be light.” Growing up, and I confess even now, I always imagined the voice of God being very deep and dramatic, as we heard echoed in today’s Psalm, and when He spoke, “LET

THEREBE LIGHT,” what had already been created would shake and rattle at this command. However, (Pause) there was no living creature around to hear the voice. God’s creation of the heavens, earth, water, and light are a secret of creation – not a single soul knew beforehand, because not a single soul existed. It is only the Divine which knew. Like our Gospel, we are let in on an element of divine secrecy.

Okay, here we are two major themes: Beginnings and Secrecy. Also, here we are at the beginning of a new year and the reality that we do not know what this next year is going to bring, it is a form of secrecy, particularly if we hold maintain the theological idea that God is all-knowing. I want to push this a little bit further by saying that the divine secrets we are now privy to, throughout all of scripture, point to hope, whether that hope begins with creation or whether that hope begins with salvation. Perhaps we, whether we doubt or are certain, are gifted glimpses of these divine secrets to prod us forward in trust, obedience, and love. We are prodded forward in trust, by hearing of God’s mercy and gift of salvation from beginning of time. We are prodded forward in obedience, by knowing we are creatures of the creator and are called to live into the fullness of creation. We are prodded forward in love, knowing that God loves us, His creation, enough to invite us to partake in divine community with Him and one another.

Today, as we commemorate Christ’s baptism, let us embrace a new beginning, a new year. Not in the same way we embrace the annual custom of New Year resolutions; rather, let us embrace the secret of the Divine, of God, at work in us as individuals, as a community, and as a Church, and as, in a few moments, we renew our baptismal covenant, let us always be willing and open to hearing the voice of God say: “You are my daughter or my son . . . with you I am well pleased.”

Let us Pray

O God, you prepared your disciples for the coming of the Spirit through the teaching of your Son Jesus Christ: Make the hearts and minds of your servants ready to receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit, that they may be filled with the strength of his presence; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen