

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson  
The Baptism of our Lord  
January 8, 2017

It looked so ordinary, so common, so unremarkable. Regular fishermen, with typical tackle boxes opened near them, had planted themselves on the shore with their fishing lines extended into the flow of water. The ease of their stance and of conversation indicated to me these were two friends who were enjoying a relaxed morning at their favorite fishing hole. We approached the narrow beach of coarse sand and the water became more in our view, and it was beautiful. The water was clear, tinted green by the abundant trees, bushes, and river grass growing along the river banks. As all flowing water does, the river seemed to beckon us closer, inviting us to absorb its flow and tranquility. The river was rather narrow in its width, and it reminded me of so many other bodies of water I had viewed while our sailboat was anchored on the Chesapeake Bay, where there's beauty in the simplicity of the scene, beauty in the natural vegetation whose roots were being nourished by the river, and beauty in the serenity of the moving but calm waters, which seem to still one's soul.

The river was unremarkable in size and appearance and yet this was the river through which all righteousness was fulfilled, as we heard in our gospel story today. This was the Jordan River. We renewed our baptismal vows on its shore, were anointed, marked as Christ's own forever, and then answered our yearning to touch the water. We stepped closer to the water, knelt beside it, cupped our hands and allowed the water to flow freely through our fingers, again and again, almost as though our hands were mirroring the words, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. This ordinary water flowing through my fingers was where this extraordinary thing had happened: Jesus was baptized. I gathered some water into a water bottle to bring home to splash on the foreheads of the ones I will next baptize, so that they may live into the fulfillment of all righteousness which occurred at Jesus' baptism.

The unexceptional nature of the River Jordan was what confirmed in me an understanding that it is in the ordinary that the extraordinary happens. Had the River Jordan been as grand and mighty as I had previously imagined, I may have come away with a different understanding of why Jesus was baptized. My focus may have been on the grandeur of the Savior, the expansiveness and almost unapproachability of the Jesus, the One for whom the heavens opened up, or may have believed that this particular spot was more holy than anywhere else.

The everyday appearance of this legendary river said to me that holiness shows up in the ordinariness of our lives. We don't need to look for mountain-top experiences to know that God is present. We don't need to find it in places of intense and remarkable beauty. Often holiness is

most present to us in the dingy places of our souls or in the uneventful moments of our lives. Jesus was baptized in a river that was beautiful, but common. This says to me that Jesus began his ministry in solidarity with and for the common, ordinary, and average people, like you and me. He comes into our ordinary lives and makes them extraordinary, and we notice that especially through the sacraments, for all of the symbols we use in our sacraments, baptism and the Holy Eucharist, are ordinary things which become the extraordinary because of the presence of the Holy Spirit and the grace of Jesus.

The water sprinkled on our heads is not just water, but the very water which contained the power of creation in Genesis, the path of liberation in Exodus, and through which we each pass so the chaff can be washed away by Jesus; for Jesus wants to wash all that drags us down and comes between us and God—the shame, guilt, selfishness, self-righteousness, the greed. We know in those three drops of water that these barriers will not be around forever, for in those splashes, God claims us and repurposes our lives for God's realm.

The oil, which marks us as Christ's own, is not just oil, but our invitation to join Christ in the long line of priests, prophets, kings, and queens, whose souls have been awakened by hovering Holy Spirit. The candle handed to us at our baptism, or the paschal candle itself, which is lit today and at all baptisms, is not an ordinary candle. It is a bright burning which holds a luminous center, a clear seeing into the truth of God. The bread and wine we consume is not just food and drink as we enjoy at any other time. It is our invitation to awaken our soul, to live faithfully into our baptism, to allow us to be named and claimed by God. In our baptism, we give our ordinary life to God and God gives it back to us as an extraordinary life, for the life we live now is the very life of God, whose divine life we share as members of Christ, children of God, and inheritors of the Kingdom.

Jesus' baptism sets loose the Holy Spirit into the world, inspiring and strengthening Jesus for his baptismal ministry, of bringing in the Kingdom of God, through healing, teaching, and preaching. The same Spirit that anointed Jesus anoints us in baptism, and this baptism immerses us into the same service and ministry in the world. One way to look at baptism is divine empowerment so that we, like Jesus, can make meaningful contributions to our church and society. Baptism immerses us in service and ministry in the world.

One way this unfolds in our lives is that the Holy Spirit gathers up the parts of our individual and ordinary lives and empowers us to commit our lives to a larger purpose. This happens whether it is a tiny baby who gets set on the right path and is given the inspiration and energy to live that long life well, or whether it's an adult who has lived life not particularly well and there is much to be washed away. The Holy Spirit gathers up our spiritual energy and directs the course of our life, so we too can bring in the kingdom of God. The mother of the first baby I baptized here said to me

afterwards, “Mother Barbara you have just given Bella the very best possible start to her life.” The mother understood that in that moment when we called upon the Holy Spirit to enter into her baby’s soul, that her life would be forever changed, and her daughter would be attached to a purpose larger than herself, and that she would be given the inspiration and energy to do it.

As baptized Christians, our lives have been gathered up into something larger than ourselves and it calls from us a commitment to a larger purpose and one lived out through our community, for our baptism is not just for us, but also for others. It means we are forever called to focus on the bigger picture of bringing in the kingdom of God, of committing to hold fast to that vision, of pledging to commit our resources, financial and time and talent to its purpose, and to recognize our mutual and mystical indwelling as sisters and brothers in Christ. In your stewardship packages, which are ready for you to take home today, I am asking each one of you to pledge, for a pledge is a financial commitment to a larger purpose, the mission and revelation of God within and among us, and it is also a heart commitment to this parish, where, it is my prayer, you are touched by God and provided the inspiration and energy of the Holy Spirit and are nourished by the body and blood of Christ.

We have come out of the water, we are joined with Christ and with each other, and in this condition of togetherness in body and soul, we bless each other. As a Christian community, we are here to remind each other that we each have been welcomed into the blessedness of Christ, who came as an ordinary baby, was baptized in an ordinary river, and who began his extraordinary ministry, inviting us into the same. May we too find and be the extraordinary in that which appears ordinary to others.