

**Episcopal Church of the
Good Shepherd
200 Route 23
Wantage, Sussex, New Jersey 07461**

Epiphany 1 (A)

January 12, 2020

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

“Never being lost”

DRAFT

The Holy Gospel according to

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, 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.”

Wash us, great heavenly Father, and make us whole. Amen.

Baptist pastor Bill Leonard in 2011 wrote: “Truth is, most churches do not gather at the river anymore [for baptisms in a manner similar to the way Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan]. We have taken [baptism] inside and toned it down considerably. Some baptisms use minimal amounts of water.”

Pastor Leonard, said, “We Baptists dip the entire body in heated, fiberglass baptisteries full of fresh water, no muss, no fuss. Perhaps on occasion, we should return to the river, with the congregation gathered all around receiving new Christian brothers and sisters with open arms, drying them off and welcoming them home. I know there are problems of time, space and pollution. In most places, if we baptized folks in the river, we would have to give them a tetanus shot immediately or send them on to heaven that afternoon. Even indoor

baptism, particularly by immersion, is an event fraught with dignity and danger and the possibility of unlimited logistical complications. We all have stories.

[And for a decade or so toward the end of the 1990's some new Episcopal churches were equipped with full length baptistries.]

https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002c33/the_river

Pastor Leonard commented, “Once when I was interim pastor of a Kentucky Baptist church, a young man named Bob

confessed faith in Christ and requested baptism. We talked beforehand of life and faith, death and hope. But not until he entered the water with me on a bright Sunday morning did I realize that Bob was over six feet tall and weighed more than 200 pounds--considerably larger than my 5 foot 6 inch self. I looked out in the congregation and saw my wife put her head in her hands, and I knew I was in big trouble. Yet, down he went, with the name of God spoken over him. And down I went, too, staggering under the weight. Somehow, we got back up, both

grateful for grace and unexpected adrenalin, all to a congregation that broke into loud spontaneous applause in celebration, relief, and good humor.

“Perhaps we should always applaud at baptism or shout like our frontier forbearers or do something a little frivolous. The angels do, Jesus said, rejoice over one measly sinner who once lost is found again, at the river.

“The early Christians certainly made the most of baptism. Tertullian describes the event as practiced in the 2nd-century church: ‘When we are going to enter the

water,’ he says, ‘we solemnly profess that we disown the devil, his pomp, and his angels. Hereupon we are thrice immersed, making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel. Then, when we are taken up, we taste first a mixture of milk and honey. And from that day we refrain from the daily bath for a whole week.’ Those early Christians, no doubt, had the odor of sanctity about them, yet they wanted to hold on to that high moment as long as possible.

“But, however we administer it, baptism should be a significant moment for participant and observer alike. And every time we do it, we should say again something of what baptism means to the people of God. As St. Paul writes, ‘For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.’ (Gal. 3:27) We not only believe in Jesus, but we also identify with him and his way of living in the world.

“In the early Christian centuries, converts were baptized naked. Did you know that? Now that would perk up a

Sunday morning worship service! And they put on white robes when they came up out of the water. It was a sign that they had literally put on Christ like a garment. They wore those robes for a period as a reminder of who they were and what they had done. We, like they, are the Christ-bearers of our world, carrying Christ with us wherever we go.

“Thus baptism is not merely a symbol of faith”--it is an act of faith, usually in the Episcopal and other catholic or orthodox centered churches, baptism is an act of faith of the parents and god

parents on behalf of their baby, their child. Perhaps we might call it a faithful act. Faith and baptism are linked inseparably. All Christian communions confirm that unity. Faith keeps baptism from becoming a purely magic ritual, while baptism keeps faith from deteriorating into a purely individualistic experience.

“And baptism is also the symbol of liberation in Christ. It is the promise of freedom to all who believe.” <>

Pastor Leonard, continues, “Our daughter, Stephanie, is a person with

special needs, learning and motor skill disabilities. Concepts do not come easily for her. Because of that I supposed that she might never receive baptism since she cannot meet all the conceptual prerequisites demanded by many Baptists. You see, she does not understand the substitutionary theory of the atonement or the historical critical method of biblical studies the way the rest of us do. But on the third Sunday in December 1991, on the way home from church, Stephanie, age 16, announced to her mother and me, ‘I think it’s time for me

to be baptized.’ We talked about it, and she was resolved, so we went to see our pastor, and he was everything a pastor should be for such a moment. He did not speak to her of what she had to KNOW, but what she wished to BE. ‘If you receive baptism, Stephanie,’ he said, ‘you are saying that you want to be a follower of Jesus. Do you want that?’ She said yes and we prayed together.

“And on Christmas Eve, [December 24, 1991,] Stephanie entered the baptistery of the Crescent Hill Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky, the same

baptistery where her father had taken the spill years before. ‘Profess your faith,’ the pastor said. ‘Jesus is Lord,’ Stephanie replied. And under she went in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in the presence of a congregation that had nurtured her to faith throughout her 16 years.’

Pastor Leonard continued, “We are all special needs persons, you and I. In some of us, it is just more public than in others. Not one of us can ever conceptualize enough to make us worthy of God's grace. If pressed, I must admit

that I know more about sin and salvation, doctrine and dogma, than my daughter ever will. But I am not certain that such knowledge makes me any closer to grace than she was on that Christmas Eve.”



Does baptism make a real difference?”

It certainly did make a real difference for Christ, as at the age of about thirty-years-old, directly after his baptism, Jesus begins his amazing, three-year ministry to bring God’s saving grace and love to the world. Now there are over

two point four billion baptized Christians on planet Earth.

Of course we Episcopalians usually baptize babies, and they have absolutely no recollection of being baptized at all, which is why we encourage all younger and even older children to ‘come up close’ to see the baptisms we do during the baptism service so they can have at least a concept in their mind’s eye of what happened to them as a baby at their own baptisms. And we seal each baptism with the sign of the cross on

their head saying they are “marked as Christ’s own forever.”

After retiring as a Rector in 2013 I have supplied almost every Sunday at many dozens of churches, and among others I spent several Sundays at a church in Staten Island. One of my priest friends in New Jersey that I admired had a set aside a regular time during the Peace in mid-service for “Kids Chat”, which I thought was a great idea and which I myself have used from time to time in parishes who had children. But there were times when the

church scene was a bit like what happened to the long-ago radio and television personality, Art Linkletter, who did something similar on his broadcast show. Art Linkletter even featured several of the children's responses in his book of experiences called, "Children Say the Darndest Things". At this particular parish on Staten Island, there were only two eight year old girls who came up for the "Kids Chat", and I thought I would ask them something about the baptismal font which happened to be up front in that

particular church. I asked the two girls, “What is this?” as I touched the baptismal font, but to my surprise they looked completely baffled and had no idea what it was. So, moving along, I asked them if they had been baptized, to which they said, ‘Absolutely not’. As it happened, one of the girl’s mother was actually the head Sunday School teacher, and she was sitting quite near the front of the congregation; her head was bobbing up and down ‘Yes’ vigorously in affirmation that those girls had been baptized. And I suggested that it would

be good to have the children right up front the next time they did baptisms.



The wife of one couple I had married got pregnant but had a problem early on with the placenta, and their baby boy was delivered very early at 26 weeks gestation. I went to the hospital Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at the urging of his parents to do an emergency baptism because they were not sure he would survive. The tiny baby was smaller than the palm of my hand and his collagen had not completely coalesced so

we could see inside his body, every organ was visible at 26 weeks. And he was of course in a warm incubator with his eyes covered so his eyes would develop normally; his skin was transparent at that early age. As I looked at the tiny baby the size of my palm, I realized the challenge of a baptism, but with one of the nurse's help I was able to procure a sterilized medicine dropper and a bottle of warm sterile water, and I proceeded with the baptism: I put the first drop of water on his tiny head using the standard words, "I baptize you in the

name of the Father”; then another drop, “and of the Son”; and a third drop, “and of the Holy Spirit.” At the time he was about the youngest premie that had ever survived, but he continued to survive.

Once he needed a single drop of blood from his father to keep him alive, he was so small; his father happened to have the exact blood type as his baby son. But the little boy did indeed live, and he was discharged from the hospital; his mother told me he was about three months in development behind other children his age when he finally came home from the

hospital. The family soon moved away to another city due to his father's employment, and I lost track of them, until years later when I was invited to celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary at a restaurant near my church. As we came into the dining area, I spotted my now healthy and tall ten-year-old baptisan running around very normally, wearing glasses, and chasing some other relative's children. He was completely normal, his mother told me. And, of course, we gave thanks to God. The Holy Spirit had taken over care of that

little one as the Holy Spirit does for all the baptized. But his survival was a very special miracle right in front of my own eyes.



So, this amazing baptism of Jesus that we read about in today's Gospel points to the righteousness Jesus is bringing to our world, where everyone is included in his offer of eternal life, excluding no one. Christ came to set us all free from sin and eternal death, marking that by Holy Baptism. A new day has dawned. The water of baptism has begun in each

of us a new life in the Spirit. Let us be open to God's mighty and miraculous claim on our lives that originated at our own baptisms, and before that, when the world began. Christ always knew us as his own forever. And he will never lose us.

Amen.

Description: Baptism is a special act of grace given to us through the ministry of John the Baptist who baptized Jesus in the River Jordan. We who are baptized are marked as Christ's own forever.

Tags: Jesus, Christ, God, baby, child, Baptist, Episcopal, catholic, orthodox, grace, mark, sealed, premature, special, needs, hospital, baptism, baptisan, mystery, Sunday, school, font, children, chat, River, Jordan, Father, Son, Holy, Spirit