

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

“We are witnesses”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

The season of Epiphany is comprised of several themes meant to reveal the meaning and work of Christ. From the visit of the Magi who saw Christ revealed in Jesus, to his baptism at the Jordan and the calling of the first disciples, to the proclamation of the good news in the Sermon on the Mount, to his divinity revealed in the Transfiguration, we see God’s love for all nations. Epiphany reveals the Christ dwelling incarnate in our humanity with grace and peace.

Jesus’ baptism is the paradigm for the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, came to the Jordan seeking baptism to fulfill the promise of scripture. John, for his part, did not want to baptize Jesus, because he believed the Messiah was greater than himself. Rather, John said, *“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”* With great humility, Jesus said to John, *“Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”* The righteousness to which Jesus referred is echoed in the words of Isaiah, *“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”* Jesus is God’s beloved servant upon whom the Spirit rests.

Jesus humbly submitted to baptism in order to reveal his self-emptying servanthood, while John understood his supporting role as the messenger of Jesus’ unfolding ministry. The humility of both John and Jesus offering their will to God’s greater plan is inspirational because it allows us to see how our lives might also have a role in God’s mission today. Whether your baptism was your parents’ decision when you were a small child, or whether it was your decision as an adult, your baptism is not simply a past event that has no bearing upon your present life. Your baptism is the eternal moment in which God called you a beloved child, and Holy Baptism continues to renew you each day with eternal life.

Baptism is a living reality that we grow into through our discipleship to Jesus. Baptism is not a graduation – like we’ve passed the test, gotten the certificate, and moved on; rather, it is new life in the reality of the risen Christ each and every day. Paul described this in Romans, writing, *“We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life”* (Rom. 6:4). To be baptized is to already walk in the newness of Christ’s resurrection life. New life in Christ begins in Holy

Baptism and continues throughout our lives.

It is probably helpful to remind ourselves that immediately after his baptism, Jesus was led into the wilderness to face temptation. Each of the Synoptic Gospels records Jesus being led from baptism into the wilderness and temptation. Baptism and the gift of the Spirit are what give Jesus, in his humanity, the strength and spiritual insight to journey in the wilderness amidst temptation. In Holy Baptism, the pastor says to the newly baptized, “child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” These baptismal words describe the gift of the Holy Spirit who leads us through life’s wilderness moments so that daily, we might live raised with Christ.

Please take a look at St. Mark’s font – it is unusual to say the least. The font is in the shape of a dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit, and it is also used to hold the water of baptism. True to the modernist architectural ideal of “form follows function,” St. Mark’s sanctuary has a font in the form of a dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit, and at the same time, functioning as a vessel carrying water that has been made holy through God’s word.

In Holy Baptism, the Spirit that descended upon Jesus is also given to each of us, empowering us to live for Christ in the wilderness of this world. Just as Jesus was called “beloved,” so God calls each of us “beloved,” because there are moments in each of our lives when we won’t feel particularly beloved. We may have experienced rejection, betrayal, brokenness or a profound sense of sinfulness; and yet, the waters of baptism continue to recreate us into beloved children of God.

I would like to share a story I heard when I was a young pastor serving a two-point parish in southern Japan. One of the churches in our conference was pastored by a retired Lutheran pastor named Yukio Ishibashi. The story he told was about a World War 2 Japanese Imperial Navy submarine commander whose submarine was depth charged during the war in the Pacific. The commander survived, and after the war, was baptized, later witnessing to Pastor Ishibashi. Pastor Ishibashi described how, after the submarine had sunk, the commander and his surviving crew were covered in oil and fuel adrift amidst debris in the Pacific. Pastor Ishibashi described how the former commander referred to baptism as like being rescued from a ship’s wreckage, covered in oil and fuel, and having been washed clean, moved from death to new life.

Most of our baptisms perhaps do not contain such drama, but the imagery is the same. We have been rescued from the shipwreck of this broken world, cleansed, forgiven and made new through the water and the word of Holy Baptism. Martin Luther addressed Holy Baptism in the *Large*

*Catechism*, writing, “To be baptized in God’s name is to be baptized not by human beings, but by God himself.” Baptism, Luther argued, is not simply common water, but water sanctified by God’s word. Luther went on, writing,

Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins of conscience oppress us, and say: “But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body.” ...Therefore, let all Christians regard their baptism as the daily garment which they are to wear all the time. (*Large Catechism*, “Baptism”)

Isaiah described the ministry to which the Messiah was called, writing, “*He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.*” *Jesus is the new covenant given to all people, “a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind...to bring from prison those who sit in darkness.”* Baptism gives us the strength to witness to our neighbor with compassion allowing our neighbor to experience the healing and liberation that Isaiah writes of from the powers that oppress people in this world.

In Acts, Peter proclaimed, “*We are witnesses to all that he did in both Judea and Jerusalem.*” In baptism, we are called to become witnesses, a light to the nations, never growing faint of offering compassion and healing to those who are lost or oppressed. Baptism makes us witnesses of Jesus’ power, who moves humanity from death to life, freeing and cleansing with water and God’s word.

You are witnesses to the power of Jesus Christ, who shows no partiality, but welcomes all in every nation who believe and do what is right. You are witnesses. You have been baptized to witness with Christ, recreating this world with Christ’s justice, healing and freedom.

Baptism is the daily garment we never outgrow or wear out. You have been clothed in Christ’s righteousness to offer the light and life of Christ for all people.

In baptism, Christ lives through you. You are his witnesses.

Live as if you are Christ’s light and life in this world. Amen.