

The First Sunday after Epiphany, 13 January 2019
St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Norman, Oklahoma
Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22
The Baptism of our Lord
and the baptism of Frederick Sterling Berger

Take a moment and relax.
Sit comfortably, close your eyes.
Breathe in easily, and breathe out.
Again.
Once more.

In the quiet of your mind, remember a time when you were near water—a lake, a pool, a clear still pond. No wind or disturbance at all; just quiet and smooth. Now see your hand reached out, as you drop a stone quietly into the water. “Plop”. See the splash as the stone drops under the surface; see the waves ripple out, small tight rings growing larger and wider until they cross and criss-cross one another, to the edge of the water and out of sight altogether.

We're hearing the beginning of the story of Jesus' ministry this morning, as the “ripples of Epiphany” move out from the center, growing larger and wider. From a few shepherds working the night shift on the edge of town, to a team of wandering Iranian astronomers, to a crowd this morning at the river's edge...the news is spreading. Who is this Jesus, and what is he about?

“The people were filled with expectation, questioning...concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.” We've heard this before, remember? During Advent, the time of waiting for revealing of the Kingdom of God, which is already present, and still on the way. And now, in the season of Epiphany (which means revelation, unveiling, showing forth) the Good News revealed in the person of Jesus Christ is placed before the eyes of an ever-expanding circle of witnesses to the story. The Good News, sometimes called “the Gospel.”

There's a missing sentence in the Gospel reading appointed for this morning. The writer summarizes the preaching of John the Baptist by stating that “...with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people.” John is bringing them Good News—a.k.a. “the Gospel.” What is this Good News? God is coming, is already present among you: See what is before you; change your minds, change your lives, let go of the things that are getting in the way of your participating in the life of God.

Jesus comes with the others in the crowd, and is baptized like anyone else. In the river, muddy and messy, kneeling in submission to this act of obedience. We can get lost if we suppose that baptism is only about the forgiveness of sins. It is about forgiveness, to be sure, but let's unpack that a bit.

“Sin” is anything that which separates us from God. When we say that Jesus was “without sin”, that does not mean that he never got angry, or never lost his temper, or never backtalked his momma. What it does mean is that he is never separated from God—the connection with the Source of all things was never broken. “I and the Father are One” Jesus says. The perceived separation,

division, brokenness that plagues us as human beings—the sense of separation between ourselves and God, and between ourselves and one another—is, in fact, resolved and healed in Jesus.

On that day at the Jordan River, Jesus is baptized with the rest of the crowd, as one just like them. “Emmanu-el”—God is with us. Among us. In our midst.

Jesus is baptized, and the Spirit descends “in the bodily form of a dove.” When the Spirit descends, Jesus and his companions (including us) get to see God’s Spirit moving, free, present in the world, in a body. Bodies matter—the matter matters. And Spirit matters too. What happens to our bodies affects our spirits; what is done by and in and to our spirits affects our bodies. We’re going to do something about that in a few moments, with water and oil, with powerful words of prayer and promise, and the embodied touch of skin-on-skin.

Jesus is baptized, in body and spirit, with water and physical touch, by a very strange person (a member of his own family, as it happens) in the wilderness. It didn’t happen in a holy building, it was muddy and messy, far away from the halls of religious and civil authority. It was outside, among outsiders, in the wilderness. In the sort of place, with the sort of people, where Jesus seems to love hanging out. With the outsiders, the people on the margins, the oddballs and the weirdos.

A voice from heaven declares “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” This is imperial language—the Roman emperors had (as have emperors throughout the world and throughout the ages) asserted that their authority was divinely established and sanctioned. But this voice is for Jesus—and it is one of the reasons that he will ultimately be arrested and executed, as a threat to imperial authority. His entire life and ministry stand as an affront, a critique, an rejection of the powers and empires and kingdoms of this world. “My kingdom is not of this world” he will tell Pontius Pilate at his trial.

“Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as in heaven” we will pray together this morning.

Jesus proclaims and embodies this kingdom, this reality, in his entire life and ministry, his death and resurrection and ascension. And the Spirit descends on him at his baptism, and on us at ours, declaring “This is my beloved.” You are named, and washed, and anointed, as one of God’s chosen. Each and all of us who have been brought to baptism (whether we remember it or not), are called as followers of Jesus, are born anew as members of Christ’s family around the world and through the ages, are enrolled as citizens of a dominion that is still strange and foreign and offensive to the empires and kingdoms of this world.

British theologian and writer Lesslie Newbigin: “How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.”

This morning we come to call Frederick Sterling Berger as a citizen of Christ’s kingdom, a member of the family of God, to wash and anoint and seal him as Christ’s own for ever. He will not remember this day; we will have to remember it for him, and help him grow into that identity as he grows up. As he grows into who he yet shall be, that identity will sometimes clash with other identities, other value systems.

And so Mama and Daddy, and the godparents, and all of us who gather around him, we will not only have to tell him about this day and what we promised for him; we'll have to show him what it looks like. What it looks like to turn away from the forces and powers and desires of destruction and domination and death; to trust with all our hearts in the grace and love of God revealed in Jesus; to live in such a way that this trust is seen and experienced by all who come near. We'll help him learn the stories of faith, and how to pray, and to participate in the worship and shared life of this St. Michael's family. We'll show him it's okay to say "I'm sorry, I was wrong" sometimes, and that love is bigger than being wrong. We'll show him how to love God, and other people, and to look for Jesus in everyone he meets.

Jesus is baptized, and called "God's Beloved."

So is Frederick Sterling.

So are we.

Beloved, cherished, washed and sealed and called as God's own, for good and for always.