

**BAPTISM OF THE LORD, YEAR A**

8 January 2023

*Matthew 3:13-17*

This morning, I want to begin by sharing the story with you. I'll say upfront that it's a very unusual story. At first it will seem like it has nothing to do with the lessons that we just read. So, please be patient with me; I assure you that I am coming back around to our Gospel reading, and I ask that you hold it in mind as I share of an experience that I had while I was in my undergraduate studies.

One of the courses that I took while studying history at the University of Toronto focused on the history of the Atlantic slave trade, to better understand how we think about freedom. A topic discussed in this class was the prison system in the United States; how African Americans are over-represented in systems of mass incarceration and particularly in instances of capital punishment. The conclusion of the course instructor was that the death penalty is racist, and we ought to do something about that.

After getting myself and my fellow student all fired-up about this, he offered the opportunity to go and make a difference. This was great; I really wanted to channel my feelings of passion over injustice into action. As it happened, my friends and I were probably overzealous when we accepted our course instructor's invitation to go and protest the death penalty on the streets of downtown Toronto, because we forgot to ask questions that should have been at the forefront of our minds ahead of going, chiefly, 'who is organizing this event?'.

When we got there, we discovered that it had been organized by a communist group. This was quite a shock to me. I didn't leave upon learning this; I stayed and watched, hoping to learn something or to gain a better understanding.

When the event was over, we were invited by some of the organizers to go and have a meal with them. I sat next to a woman who was part of the communist group. As she was doing a debrief of the event, I'm sure that she could sense my discomfort. At one point, she turned to me and said, "Are you a Christian?" I replied, "Yes, I'm a Christian," which seemed to make her angry. She retorted, "The problem with you Christians is that you point people towards the promise of paradise in the afterlife, so that you can get off the hook for engaging with the suffering of the world in the here and now." She continued, "The people who gave you your faith, they don't care about you. They don't care about your life. They just want to placate you by pointing to something beyond now."

Her words shook me. I didn't want to entertain the thought that those who had given me the faith did not care about me, or about my life. Being younger in my faith, and not a great apologist, I was left speechless and wondering why I was so bothered.

The baptism of our Lord is a reminder that this is absolutely not true. Jesus, the author of our faith, absolutely cares about you; he cares about your life. God could have brought about salvation for humankind any way that he wanted to; he gave himself, his only begotten son to become incarnate, to share life with us. Jesus knows the suffering that my communist friend spoke about, because he lived among us.

Why did Jesus' life among us include his baptism? Many of our first thoughts about baptism are about being cleansed of our sins. So, why was it necessary for him to do this? The answer is love. Jesus did not need to be baptized (i.e. there was nothing 'in it' for him); he did it not for himself, but for us. He went there first so that we could follow him there.

Many of us sitting in this church today have been baptized; a rite of passage that we may not even remember, particularly if we were infants. And yet, in various liturgies of our Anglican tradition we are invited to remember our baptism and be thankful. Have you thought about what it is that you are giving thanks for?

(1) First of all, we give thanks that God cleanses us of our sins.

We are made clean. Hear this well: this does not mean that remembering your baptism should make you feel badly about yourself. Instead, it is meant to help us throw off the chains of guilt, that prevent us from being who God created you to be.

What is it that you feel guilty about and need to be free of?

At my elementary school it was the tradition at grade eight graduation to have a valedictory address at the ceremony. This person was chosen by the teachers from among the student body. Who had been appointed as valedictorian was to remain an absolute secret until the graduation ceremony, when they stood up to deliver their address.

About a month before graduation I was pulled aside by the grade eight teachers and asked if I would be the valedictorian. As I'm sure that you've gathered, I don't shy away from public speaking, so I was excited to have the opportunity to deliver the address. My teachers really impressed upon me how important it was that I do not tell anybody, because if I did, it would be taking something away from the students; it would be ruining the surprise. I assured them that this wasn't a problem; I wouldn't tell anybody that I was the valedictorian.

Several students were suspicious of me and the other potential candidates for this role. They began to question myself and the others: "Are you the valedictorian?", "Tell us if you're the valedictorian", and I would say, "No, no, no; it's not me". One day, a group of boys came up to me and said, "swear to us that you're not the valedictorian." I swore to them, because I really didn't want to ruin the surprise, as I had been told. One of this group, a boy named Billy said, "Swear to God, that you're not the valedictorian". As I started to explain, "Well, I don't really do that; I don't really swear to God that way," he begins shouting out to everybody around us, "Sarah is the valedictorian! Sarah is the valedictorian!" I was mortified, so interjected, "No, I'm

not, I swear to God! I swear to God, that I'm not the valedictorian!" He turned to me, and said, "You'd better not be lying. Because if you're lying, you're going to hell... because you swore to God."

This made me pretty nervous. I knew that I had intentionally lied. When I went home, I found a Bible in my room. We weren't really churchgoers, so I didn't realize that you aren't supposed to read the Bible like an encyclopedia or dictionary. I managed to find the place in the Old Testament, where it says, "Thou shalt not swear falsely in the name of the Lord. For this, no one shall escape punishment," (cf. Exodus 20:7). For as long as I can remember after this time, I would struggle to go to sleep at night, thinking that I was going to hell; thinking that I had sold my soul in a failed effort to do the right thing.

Remembering our baptism is meant to help us be free of these things. This truth restores God's peace to us. It helps us sleep at night. I know now that I am forgiven.

You also are forgiven. Moreover, you are set apart, made holy. This is very good news: though it is not impossible to sin, recalling our baptism is a reminder that Jesus has made it possible for us not to sin.

(2) Secondly, we give thanks for our baptism because it is a mark of the community that God has called us into.

When we are marked with the chrism as Christ's own forever, we become members of His body, the Church. It is in this community that we remind each other, when we most need to hear it, that we are forgiven. We are made whole.

(3) Thirdly, we give thanks for our baptism because we have been given a vocation.

You may recall in past sermons that I have referred to our vocations as baptized members of Christ's church. What does this mean? In the world outside of the church, 'vocation' is often used to refer to a person's profession or career, but the word comes from the Latin *vocatio* which means 'a call' or 'summons'.

St. George's is a place where members of the body understand their vocations. You bear good fruit. When people ask me how things are here, one of my first responses is to speak about your love for one another, and for your community.

If there were an opportunity to introduce my communist friend to you, I think that she would have a hard time accusing anyone here of pointing to paradise in the afterlife instead of taking genuine care of one another's needs at present. You feed the hungry. You visit the sick. You care for the widow. You are compassionate to the marginalized, and you are generous in hospitality. I am so proud to be part of a church that responds to need in love as you do.

The wonderful thing about participating in the ministry of Christ is that it is dynamic. Our God-given vocations should fill us with eager anticipation to see what God is doing now, and to ask, what are we being called to for a time such as this? Many of us evaluate our lives in January and set new goals. The celebration of the New Year is a good reminder that we are always to be asking, 'what now?' Where are you leading us, Lord? Who are you equipping us to serve?

Let us pray for ears to hear 'what now', and hearts that are open to serving as we are called. May we remember our baptisms and be thankful. Remember that he made a way for us through water into freedom, salvation, and holiness; let us joyfully go where he calls us now.

Amen.