

The First Sunday After the Epiphany
Year C – 12 January 2025
St. Benedict's Episcopal Church, Los Osos
Berkeley D. Johnson, III

May I speak in the Name of the Holy, Living, and Undivided Trinity; one God, now and forever. Amen.

Today's Gospel reading from Luke tells the well-known story of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River.

While there is much potentially to focus on, and there are many directions we could go with this passage, I want to keep things simple this morning.

The focus on baptism brings me back to my time at seminary. For those who don't know, I was deeply blessed to attend the Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) in Cambridge, MA, from 2004-2007, where I received a Master of Divinity.

Baptismal theology was emphasized at EDS. It was absolutely central to our faith formation. In fact, we had a course on it: Baptismal Vocation, Ministry, and Leadership: Toward a New Ecclesiology.

Yes, an entire semester, one course, focused on baptism.

So, what can I hope to achieve this morning in 8-12 minutes?

That's why I want to keep things simple.

When I first looked at the readings for this morning a couple of weeks ago and saw that I would be preaching on Jesus' baptism, the first thought that came to mind was "I don't think I've ever really preached a sermon on baptism before! I think it's time to do that."

The next thing I recalled from that formative time in seminary were the words of Verna Dozier, an Episcopal lay woman and theologian, who made the simple observation that “with his baptism, Jesus’ ministry commenced.”

Now I know, from having preached well over 100 sermons at this point, that no one ever really remembers much of anything you say.

So, if you remember nothing else, remember this: Jesus has no public ministry before his baptism; and similarly, our authority as ministers arises in and through our baptism into the Body of Christ.

It’s my central message this morning, so I’ll say it again, slightly differently: Our authority for ministry rests (or resides) in the fact that we are baptized members of the Body of Christ.

And that’s it. There is not, nor will there be, any further commissioning. We already possess everything we need to be ministers, and to engage in ministry.

Whether we’re 11, 51, or 91, we are authorized and commissioned to engage in ministry through our baptism.

And our faith formation will never be complete. We will never be “done”.

We will never have it mastered (regardless of any degrees, titles, certifications, or ordinations we may obtain along the way). It will always be an ongoing process for us of learning, engaging, refining, and yes, messing up.

In her article, *Baptism as Sacrament of Struggle and Rite of Resistance*, Deborah Flemister Mullen writes:

Baptism marks us for life as disciples of Christ and sets us free to respond to the ministry of ‘God service,’ into which Jesus was initiated at his baptism. Baptism is our initiation into this same ministry and the means by which we take on the full meaning of Jesus’ life and death as our calling. Baptism is the way we become heirs with the risen Christ to the ministry of God service and with his risen body, the church, as we strive to reach the goal of visible unity in one faith and common life.ⁱ

Now, I need to point out that the focus of Flemister Mullen’s article is on our call as members of Christ’s body to combat, eradicate, and repent of the evil and sin of racism, in the church and in society at large, so it would be a disservice for me to quote her words and not let you know the central theme of her message. But it goes directly to the heart of our baptismal covenant in the Book of Common Prayer, that we will “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.”

(Pause)

Because many of us don’t remember our baptisms, and because we haven’t, at least in my experience, performed a lot of baptisms in the time I’ve been here, it’s possible that we don’t always see or perceive of baptism as the source of our authority for ministry; thus, we may lose sight of its centrality.

As Klara Tammany writes, in her Introduction to *Living Water: Baptism as a Way of Life*, “Because of the practice of infant baptism, many adults in our church today do not remember their baptism. They [and I would change that to ‘We’] need constantly to be reminded of its implications... We must intentionally and consciously find ways to make baptism a grounding for our lives as Christians.”ⁱⁱ

Tammany goes on to say, “[t]wo basic questions shape the conversation: What does our life say about our belief? [and] How does our belief in God influence the way we live our lives?”ⁱⁱⁱ

(repeat)

And I just want to take a moment to be clear that I realize there may be some here, or watching online, who are not baptized, and that nothing I’m saying is meant to be construed as some sort of litmus test for belonging or inclusion or exclusion. For instance, if you’re a member of another faith background, you might look to your own tradition for a comparison. Or if you were raised with no faith tradition, or are considering getting baptized, then hopefully this can serve as an enriching or deepening of your understanding and awareness of how we see it as central to our faith and life as followers of Jesus.

(Pause)

I have to say I was, once again, struck on Friday night, as I reflected on the Star Party we held here, how much this parish truly lives out its baptismal vocation.

For anyone who doesn’t know, Rev. Linzi+ found out on Friday that a teacher who was dear to her had died. So, at the last minute, she was unable to be here with us. And because today is the 2nd Sunday of the month, and she is covering St. Luke’s, I was preparing this sermon already in my head, if not on the page, and thus I was viewing everything happening here on Friday evening through the lens of what I would be preaching about, namely, our baptismal ministries, this Sunday morning.

And I thought to myself, what if each of us saw everything we did, and do, as a living out of our baptismal ministry? Everything – from the sharing of the announcements about the party, the preparation of this space and the star words, the preparation of the food and the work in the

kitchen, the conversations around the table, the reenactment and singing of the ancient story of the Maji being led by the star, the preparation for and participation in the liturgy of the chalking of the doors, the prayers, and the cleaning up afterwards, all of it – as arising from the authority that resides in us as a result of our baptism.

I was struck also by these words, from A. Theodore Eastman in *The Baptizing Community*:

“[w]hen baptism is seen as utterly basic and central, the church comes to life.”^{iv}

So that’s how I felt here on Friday night – that we are a church fully alive, living out our baptismal ministries; and so I also think it’s the perfect sermon topic for a lay-led Liturgy of the Word service on a Sunday morning.

(Pause)

But we also live in the world, don’t we; so we need also to examine how we are being called to live out our baptismal ministry, our baptismal vocation, in the world?

When we work for racial justice, justice for LGBTQ+ people, environmental justice, and speak out against economic injustice; when we come alongside our immigrant neighbors, the poor, the sick, the suffering, the marginalized, we are living out our lives as baptized members of a baptizing community, just as Jesus did.

When we care for others, when we open our hearts in kindness toward one another, at work, at home, at school, at church, in the store, we are exercising that ministry granted to us in our baptism; and that is why it impacts us so powerfully and profoundly when we give of ourselves in service to others.

But I also know many of us are tired. The pastoral sensitivity of my own ministry as a chaplain makes me acutely aware of that.

I know we are facing a lot of uncertainty, in our country and in the world. Our immediate neighbors to the south have just experienced incalculable loss and devastation this past week. And that is why I think the time is ripe to focus on our baptism. To remember from whence comes our strength.

You may have heard it said that blood is thicker than water, but baptism announces that water is thicker than blood.^v

As Henry Nouwen reminds us, yes, we are in the world, but we are no longer of the world. Through our baptism, we are Christ's, and we belong to Christ.^{vi}

I know we don't all enter through the same doors when we arrive here, but the baptismal font is located right over here; the water in it has been blessed, it is something we can touch with our fingers, and I am cognizant of the fact that rather than being closed and tucked away in some corner of the church, it is out and open and available to us as an important reminder of the central place that baptism holds for us in our lives.

So, that's it. Yes, there is more, so much more, we could discuss and focus on, about baptism, the readings, the questions that arise from all of it; but that is the message that came to me – that through our baptism, we are all ministers, through Christ, and in Christ, and with Christ.

Blessed, Heavenly, and Holy Creator, may we continue to be strengthened in our ministries, and united with Christ, and one another, through the power of Your Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Deborah Flemister Mullen, "Baptism as Sacrament of Struggle and Rite of Resistance" in Susan E. Davies & Sr. Paul Theresa Hennessee, eds, *Ending Racism in the Church* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), p. 70.

ⁱⁱ Tammany, Klara, *Living Water: Baptism as a Way of Life*, (New York: Church Publishing Inc. 2002), p. 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 3.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 28 (from Eastman, Theodore, *The Baptizing Community*, pp.31,36.

^v Ibid., p. 27 (from Anderson, Herbert & Foley, Edward, *Mighty Stories*, p. 65.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 98 (from Nouwen Henry, *Bread for the Journey*.