

Trinity Church
January 13, 2008

Baptism of Jesus
RCL, Year A, I Epiphany

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*The voice of the Lord is upon the waters;
The Lord is upon the mighty waters,
And in God's Temple, all cry, "Glory."*

There is so much of what we believe and experience of God in today's Scripture readings that it would take days of reflection for us to capture it all. So, let me point to just two aspects of Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism.

The first aspect is Jesus' words to John the Baptizer when John objects to Jesus' request for baptism. "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us, in this way, to fulfill all righteousness." The second aspect is what Matthew says when Jesus comes up from the water: "The heavens were opened to him."

Matthew is the only Gospel writer to record this exchange between John and Jesus, and most readers have seen it as responding to irony that if from his birth Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed of God, why did he need to be baptized like the rest of us sinners. After all — he had nothing of which to repent.

But I see it differently, when Jesus says, "Let it be so now," I think Jesus is saying to himself, to God, and to John, "I am ready. I have heard what the prophets said, 'Here is my servant, my chosen. I have put my spirit upon him. He will not be crushed; he will establish justice in the earth. I have given you as a covenant to the people.' I have heard all these words, and I am ready to have them fulfilled. I want to live these words in myself. I think it is God's call to me. So let's do it, John. Let it be so now. In this baptism I want to be born into God's promise, live into the prophet's words. I want to fulfill the righteousness proclaimed there. I am ready."

Together, Jesus and John take a horrifying risk. What if they should plunge themselves down into this water of repentance and new birth, and nothing happen? What if God is silent? What if the words of the prophet, beautiful as they are, are hollow? It is safer and easier to hope for the Messiah, hope for God to act, prepare for God in repentance. It is another thing altogether to throw yourself into the waters of creation and become the Messiah, to be the words of the prophet, to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus says to John, "I am ready," takes a deep breath, and throws himself into the waters of chaos where God will either make a new creation, or not, as God wills.

Like Jesus, if we come seriously today to renew our baptismal covenant, as we are soon to do, then like Jesus, we must be ready to be the words of the prophet, not just to hope for them. We too must say, "Let it be so now." Be so now in me.

Jesus breaks the surface of the water, and in an instant, the heavens are opened to him: our second aspect. The heavens of God's own being are torn open. God's heart is torn open to him. The words of the prophet become the very words of God: "I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness. I have taken you by the hand and kept you. I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to all peoples, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring forth prisoners out of their darkness. I am the Lord, I give my glory to you. let this spring forth in you *now*."

The Spirit of God lifted Jesus out of the water and into the righteousness of God. God spoke, saying, "This is my Son, this is the one who will be my word, live my word, die my word, be raised by my word. This is the one in whom the words of the prophet live, and I am well pleased."

As we come today to renew our baptismal faith, we must make no mistake. This is not some sort of dress rehearsal, or act in anticipation of God's grace. This is the real deal. The heavens are opened to us in Christ. God in and through our Lord Jesus takes us by the hand. The Spirit lifts us up, the Word of God speaks, and like Christ, we are, in an instant, with Christ and in Christ, and through Christ, the righteousness of God. We are those who proclaim his word; we are those who bring forth justice, open the blind eyes, and set the imprisoned free, because our eyes are open and we have been set free.

It is in the Spirit that Peter speaks in the Acts of the Apostles. His eyes have been opened. He has been set free in Christ, and he says, "I now truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation and people, anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him." It is only in the Holy Spirit that we can truly say, "I seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving my neighbor as myself." It is only in the Holy Spirit that we can truly say that we respect the dignity of every human being. Bishop Michel said to the Vestry on his recent visit to us, "We have been talking about being an inclusive and caring Christ-centered community for years. Now we are determined to live it." Christ has set us free to live it.

Today we stand before God in the water of baptism and shout, "We are ready! Today God in Christ takes us by the hand and in the Spirit we fulfill all righteousness."

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters. Amen.