

The First Sunday after Epiphany

Text: Mark 1:4-11

⁴John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Theme: A New Beginning

It's a new year. That often feels like a fresh start, although a friend said that this year started so bad, that he can't wait until 2019. All of our readings today also talk about a new beginning. The Old Testament speaks of the beginning of the world, the epistle about our rebirth as children of God in baptism, and our Gospel lesson, the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In the midst of the sin and evil of this world, God gives us a new beginning in Christ.

I. Jesus' baptism marked a new beginning for Him in His life.

It was the day that He began His ministry. Until this point there were no sermons and no miracles. Last Sunday's Gospel summarizes well what Jesus did in those first 30 years to save us. He was obedient. He did everything that was according to the Law of the Lord. His parents made sure that He was circumcised. They presented Him at the temple. They took Him to the festivals. He did everything according to the Old Testament laws, especially that He loved God above all things and His neighbor as Himself.

Then suddenly one day, He went from Nazareth to the Jordan. He stood in a line of sinners and was baptized by John the Baptist. Unlike the other people He had no sins to confess, but an amazing thing happened. Heaven opened. The Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove, and God the Father said, "*This is My beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.*" Jesus was the one who was now anointed to begin His journey to the cross where He would bear all of our sins.

II. That sacrifice would bring a new beginning for the whole world.

Those of you who came to our Advent midweek services might remember that I preached on the Old Testament lesson from the creation in the first service. I learned something as I prepared that sermon. I knew that the Hebrew phrase for "without form and void" was "tohu wabohu." What I didn't know was how that phrase is used throughout the Old Testament. It is used several times to show that we bring the chaos and emptiness back into the world through our sins. For instance it

says in Jeremiah 4, *“My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil’ they know not how to do good.”*” I looked at the earth, and it was **formless and empty**; and at the heavens, and their light was gone.” (Jer 4:10,11) God went on to say, *“Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city. Although they say, “As surely as the Lord lives,” still they are swearing falsely.”* (Jer 4:1-2) The sins of the people had brought chaos back into the world. The order that God had created with His commandments was gone. They themselves had brought *tohu wabohu* into their society. That’s what happens whenever we sin. We made a mess of both the world and our lives.

But at Jesus’ baptism heaven was opened again to restore goodness. The same Spirit who was hovering over the waters on the first day of creation filled Jesus so that He could redeem us from our sins. The same God who said, “Let there be light,” proclaimed, “This is my beloved Son.” Through Jesus God was bringing light, righteousness, peace, hope, and everything good back into the world again. His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead would bring a new beginning to the world. His life, death, and resurrection has become the center of all of history. In fact, we measure time whether something is “Before Christ” BC or “The Year of our Lord” AD.

III. Our baptism into Christ has brought a new beginning to each of our lives.

We were all born as children of wrath. The Bible calls us sinners and God’s enemies. There was nothing good in any of us. We all have to confess that we have personally brought “*tohu wabohu*” back into the world by the wicked things that we have done. None of us have kept the 10 Commandments perfectly.

But God has cleansed you and me. He has washed us clean of all of our sins. The Greek word for “baptize” means “to wash.” In baptism we were baptized into Jesus’ death and raised again to a new life. There is not a spot of sin that remains. Ever sin had been washed away, and we have been clothed with the pure righteousness of Jesus Christ. The most important day in every one of our lives was the day when we were baptized into Christ. It was a day of a new beginning as a child of God. From that day on, God has loved and cared for us as His dear children, and we look forward to our eternal inheritance with Him in heaven.

But it’s also a day of new beginnings in how we live. In today’s epistle lesson Paul asks whether we should just sin all that we want to because God will forgive us anyway. His answer is “By no means!” We died to sin and were raised to a new life in Christ. Our baptism was not just a new beginning in that our sins were washed away. It is also a new beginning that we want to love and serve each other as God has loved us in Christ. We love our spouse and children. We honor each other. We want to be honest, hardworking, and truthful. We forgive each other as God has forgiven us. No one is perfect. We all still need God’s forgiveness, but as Christians our desire is no longer to serve our sinful passions, but the God who loved us so much that He gave His Son to save us. We want to be gracious and merciful to each other as God has been toward us.

Baptism is really a time of a new beginning. Jesus' baptism began His ministry to the cross where He would redeem us. Our baptism is a new beginning that takes the sin and chaos from our lives, covers us with the righteousness of Christ, and puts us on a path to follow Him, in faith, hope and love as our Savior. May God grant each of us that fresh start and new beginning in Christ.

Amen.

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**Prayer of the Church
The Epiphany of Our Lord
7 January 2018**

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

Brief silence

We come to You, holy Father, with great joy, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Through Him we can call you our Father, rejoicing in our new birth as your children. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Remember, Lord, Your Holy Church. Watch over her and guide her. Grant her peace and unity throughout the world. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Remember, Lord, our Synod president, Matthew; our district presidents; and all pastors, teachers, deaconesses and servants of the Church. Grant them to hold and teach the faith that comes to us from the holy prophets and apostles. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Remember, Lord, our president, our public servants and all in our armed forces. Guide, bless, protect and uphold them in honor. Bring all nations into the ways of peace and justice. In Your kindness and love, grant us seasonable weather and an abundance of the fruits of the earth. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Remember, Lord, all who suffer for Your name, all who are in prison, the hungry and the homeless, the poor and the lonely, those who travel, and all who cry out to You in their time of need [*especially _____*]. Take each hurting heart under Your tender care and grant them Your peace and a happy issue out of all their afflictions. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Through Him and with Him and in Him all honor and glory is Yours, O God the Father Almighty, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. **Amen.**