

St. Paul's, Concord
12 & 13 January 2019
The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ
Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
Rev. Kate Atkinson

Over the Christmas period, we had visits from some parishioners we haven't seen for a while. Greg Baker and Liz Preysner were on Christmas break from Berkeley, Yale Divinity School, and Liz Denauw was back for her break from Virginia Theological Seminary. Over the past ten years, there've been several other members of this parish who've finished their training and moved on to fulfill their vocations in other places: Katie Solter, Patrick McNamara, Shawn LaFrance, Linda Spinella, Mike Andres. And then of course there's Steve Blackmer – who didn't just *go* to another church after his ordination, he *started* one: Church of the Woods in Canterbury.

Anyone who's gone through the process of discernment and preparation for holy orders can tell you that the service of Ordination is an experience like no other. Yes, it's a culmination of many years of hard work – not to mention all the other struggles and challenges that go along with answering God's call. But it's so much more than the achievement of something one has been working towards – because the reality is that the sacrament of Ordination signifies not a completion but a *beginning*.

For Greg, and the two Lizzes, the sacrament of ordination is still some way off. But, when it takes place, when the Bishop lays his or her hands on their heads and calls upon God's Holy Spirit to fill them with grace and power, a whole new life of ministry will open up for each of them, just as it did for Katie, Pat, Shawn, Linda, Mike, and Steve before them. And just as it did for our curates, Herb, Keith, and Drew. Ordination is the start of something big – it brings a whole new set of challenges, and a whole new treasury of joy and fulfillment.

So there's a lot to rejoice about – and not only because of these particular calls to ministry, but because of our own. At the service of Ordination, the Bishop reminds us all that “*every* Christian is called to follow Jesus Christ, serving God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit” (Book of Common Prayer pg. 543). Just three weeks from today, we'll have a chance to witness that call to follow Christ and serve God when we baptize baby Hudson, one of the newest members of our church family. At that service we'll also reaffirm our own baptismal vows and we'll be reminded of the gifts for ministry that we *all* receive through the Holy Spirit.

So why am I talking about the call to ministry today? Because this is the day we celebrate the baptism of the one whose ministry inspires us all.

Does it surprise you to discover that Jesus is given the same affirmation of *his* ministry that we are? Like us he receives the sacrament of Holy Baptism, in his case, by John in the River Jordan. And like us, he gets a divine stamp of approval through the action of God's Holy Spirit, who descends upon him like a dove. To crown it all, God's voice comes from heaven, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

What I find so remarkable about these affirmations – the ones that Jesus receives *and* the ones we receive – is that they come at the *start* of our respective ministries. Before Jesus has done anything he hears God’s voice saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” This happens *before* Jesus goes into the wilderness to prepare for his ministry. It happens before he returns to heal the sick and comfort the lost and give sight to the blind. He’s hasn’t even started his work, yet he’s declared beloved and well pleasing to God.

Jesus didn’t have to prove himself in order to win his Father’s love and approval. *Neither do we.*

One of my favorite Biblical meditations comes from today’s gospel passage, and I would like to share it with you now. I invite you to begin by imagining the scene at the River Jordan, as Jesus approaches John to be baptized by him. Then imagine *yourself* in Jesus’ place. As you bring to mind God’s words of love and approval, imagine them directed at you. Hear God say, “*You* are my daughter, my son. You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased. You are my daughter, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

It’s a life-changing experience, when we allow God’s universal love to become personal. Not only does God give us that love freely and with no strings attached, God actually claims us as children. Not simply created beings, not just a species chosen to populate the world God made, but sons and daughters – each of us as precious to God as if we were an only child.

And that brings me back to the affirmation of our ministry, the affirmation we share with Jesus himself, and which comes before we even have a chance to earn it. With both our identity and our worth established, we’re free to live as God would have us live. We’re inspired to live by God’s standards, and not by anyone else’s. Through our baptism and the action of the Holy Spirit, we commit ourselves to a life lived in response to God’s great love.

As John wrote in the first of his letters: “We love because God first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

At Hudson’s service of Baptism, when we *all* re-affirm our Baptismal Covenant, we’ll be promising to live out the vows that marked our initial entry into the family of God.

Those vows remind us that, just as Jesus went into the wilderness to be tested, we too are tested – not by God, but by life. Life as a baptized child of God is not without pain and suffering. In fact, it can be even more painful because it opens us up to the needs and hurts of others. As we reach out to those who suffer, we can only make a real difference when we *share* in their suffering.

Our reading from Isaiah reminds us of how attentive God is to us, how protective God is of us frail and wayward creatures. That care and empathy is what inspires the ministry of deacons in particular. As Brother Charles Edward can attest, that is a ministry dedicated to those people who’ve been ignored – or even mistreated – by the rest of the world, a ministry of servanthood particularly to those who are poor, weak, sick and lonely. In the liturgy of ordination to the diaconate, the Bishop reminds new deacons that “in serving the helpless, (they) will be serving Christ himself.”

Charles Edward, Katie, Pat, Shawn, Linda, Mike, Steve, Herb, Keith, Drew, Greg, Liz, and Liz – they’ve all been called to ordained ministry, but that doesn’t mean that the rest of us are off the hook! Just imagine how it would be if we *all* looked for Jesus in the face of everyone we met. Imagine how our response to people would change.

In baptism each of us is given a ministry; and as we seek to live out our Baptismal Covenant we find all of life to be ministry. With our identity as God’s beloved and God’s delight infusing our minds and hearts, we’re able to do what God wants without question, without regret and with tremendous joy. It’s good to share that joy with one another too. We have special days of celebration throughout the church year – but *every* day is an opportunity to celebrate a life lived in harmony with God’s purposes.

When Greg, Liz, and Liz are ordained, the Bishop will pray for each of them, asking God to give them the Holy Spirit, and to fill them with grace and power. Before they even begin their ministry as deacons, and eventually priests, they will each receive God’s blessing and affirmation. Without doing anything to earn God’s love, they will be assured, by the action of the Holy Spirit, that they are already beloved and pleasing to God, God’s precious son and daughters. Anointed and empowered, as Jesus was at the time of his baptism, they will go out to do the work they’re called to do, knowing that God is with them. (Hudson will be anointed and empowered too, by the sacrament of baptism – although it will take him a little longer to grow into the work that God calls him to!)

As for the rest of us, I continue to pray that everyone in this place would hear and respond to God’s call – whatever that personal call may be – with certainty and confidence that we are *all* God’s beloved sons and daughters, in whom God is well pleased.