

Baptism of Jesus  
January 12, 2020  
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**We don't feel the need to look up the definition  
Of words that we've heard or used a thousand times.  
In our minds the meaning is clear.  
Our understanding of the word is already forged.**

**So as we gather today to ponder again the narrative of Jesus' baptism,  
As we celebrate the sacrament for two young lives,  
I invite us to think about the words we use  
In this ritual around the font:  
Because there, too, we hear words  
The meanings of which we think we know.**

**Live, hear, share, proclaim, serve, and strive.  
These are the verbs of the baptismal covenant promises.  
Promises made at the font by candidates, parents,  
Sponsors, godparents, indeed all of us,  
Every time we remember our own.**

**As the covenant of baptism is forged by word, Spirit, and community,  
We're ALL promising to live those verbs out in our lives.**

**I was fascinated to learn that there are 9 definitions of "to live"  
In the modern English dictionary;  
One of them especially catching my eye:  
"To live is to have a life rich in experience."**

Whenever God's people live in community with one another,  
There is Christ in the center of them –  
Promising presence until the end of the age.  
And that even THEN our lives will continue  
In his unfailing grace and unending love.

To live among God's faithful people  
Is to join our brothers and sisters across time and space  
To worship God and give thanks for all that God has done.  
All because of what God does with a bit of water  
And a whole lot of love.  
It is a rich experience, indeed.

We promise to hear God's word,  
And that is so much more than our ears processing  
Sound waves as they pulse through the air.  
Just like sharing in the Lord's Supper is much more than  
Passing a passing a plate of potatoes at dinner.

There is great weight to these actions:  
Hear God's word *and* act, be shining lights, be salt for the earth.  
Share the bread and wine *and* be one bread, one community.

Bible Studies, talking about your favorite verses,  
Discussing the more challenging ones,  
Teaching your children about Noah's Ark or Jesus' friend Lazarus,  
Touching a wine-soaked wafer to the lips  
Of someone who is dying and cannot eat,  
Doing all of this to remember the one  
Who came to save us from sin by giving his own self.

Hearing and sharing are much, much more  
Than going through the motions of Sunday morning:  
For we hear and share God's life-giving gifts  
To those whom God loves as much  
As God loves you.

Another verb of baptismal promise is to proclaim.  
We are all called to proclaim the good news of God in Christ.  
Every one of us: not just pastors standing in pulpits.

And not just once, or once in a while.  
We are called to proclaim the good news day after day,  
Never ceasing, just as the disciples did in Acts.

The voice that calls down from heaven as Jesus comes from water  
Is not just for him, but for everyone gathered by the river:  
"This one right here is my beloved."  
"This one right here is the one who is promised."  
"This one right here is the way and truth and light,  
And your baptisms are now exactly the same as his."  
Go and do likewise.

When despair, fear, and darkness press in,  
We cling to our baptisms in Christ,  
To the hope and courage and light promised to us.

As we mourn those who have gone before us,  
We ground our sorrows on the framework of grace,  
The bold claim that our death is wrapped up in Jesus.  
As just as Jesus is raised from the dead...so too, us.

We are united with Christ in death and in life through baptism,  
We are united throughout temptation in the wilderness.

United in wandering through the country sides of our city  
Bringing Good News to the poor,  
Binding up those others who are brokenhearted,  
Those who are blind, lame, alone, afraid,  
Pushed to the edge, imprisoned, and dying.

Our baptisms aren't just for us, but for the world around us too.  
We are called to live in baptismal hope,  
And to respond to God's grace  
By telling the world our story:  
Which, in the end, is really God's story.  
The story of immeasurable love  
Poured out for all people.

But it is hard to do.  
The wilderness exists.  
The temptation to abandon our calling is real.

To serve all people following the example of Christ,  
Means colliding with two difficult words that make things  
Challenging for us: "all" and "example"

Those words can be troubling because the story of Jesus  
Is full of people who probably don't belong  
To the Nazareth Country Club  
Or shop at the Jerusalem Gap.

Those not like us for whatever reason we come up with,  
They are the "all", and Jesus' unwavering love is the "example."  
That is the mission field, that is the ministry of the church.

There are many times when we would be thrilled  
If the “all” wasn’t so broad  
And the “example” wasn’t so high a standard.  
But it is.

The story of Jesus’ ministry to the people on the outside  
Is the example for ministry to those of us here on the inside.

We are the church for the sake of the world...  
Here when we gather around word, water, meal, and fellowship,  
AND when we gather in our various offices and shops,  
Around meeting agendas, water coolers,  
Business lunches, and staff parties.  
You are the church in your car,  
The sport’s field, the airplane.

We are the church.  
And while you and I might not ever heal a blind man,  
Cure a leper or raise someone from the dead,  
We can most certainly love our neighbor,  
Clothe our neighbor, visit our neighbor,  
Feed our neighbor.

Because ultimately, THAT is the example of Christ.  
That deep and abiding love of the Word dwelling among us:  
Sent to model love, especially for the “not us.”

In a world full of systems that are cruelly efficient  
At labelling those who aren’t like us,  
It is challenging to serve,  
Especially in places where we’d rather not be.

**It is difficult to strive for justice and peace  
When the systems that promise injustice and war  
Seems so unbeatable.**

**But the gifts of God given to us in baptism are reminders  
That we are equipped to do just that.**

**We know a God acting in ways that defy imagination  
Throughout the history of creation.**

**We are given the power of the Spirit, hear the word of God,  
Are nourished by Christ's own self,  
And sent out with good courage knowing  
That God's hand is leading us  
And God's hand is guiding us.**

**You, you beloved children of God, you are called by the Holy Spirit  
And marked with the cross of Christ, forever.**

**You are a part of THE story that draws us together  
Yesterday, today, and tomorrow,  
By Christ the same, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.**

**You are God's son.  
You are God's daughter.  
You are beloved, you are called, you are equipped,  
You are ready.**

**The verbs of baptism are present,  
They are active, they are imperative,  
And they are gift for you.**

**It is a wild ride in these waters,  
But we never journey alone,  
For there is always a community around us,  
Its arms outstretched as we come up from the water  
Announcing a profound and holy truth:**

**We welcome you into the Lord's family.  
We receive you as a fellow member of the body of Christ,  
A child of the same heavenly Father,  
And a worker with us in the kingdom of God.**

**As songwriter Matthew West reminds us:  
"The Christian life was never meant to be lived alone.  
Together we're a body. A family. The people of God"**

**In River Forest, in Austin, Texas,  
And in every other corner of the world.**

**As I step down from this pulpit for the last time,  
I give thanks for the privilege of serving as your pastor.**

**You have blessed, nurtured, formed, and strengthened me  
As we have lived out these baptismal verbs together.**

**While a new distance will soon separate us,  
We are never far apart from those we love and who love us.**

**May God's blessings be upon all of us this day, and always.**

**Amen.**