

Highland Presbyterian Church
Baptism of the Lord – January 7, 2024
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Psalm 29

Mark 1:4-11

It always seems like good timing to me that the day we celebrate the baptism of our Lord takes place just at the start of a new calendar year because both things are about beginnings. Jesus's baptism in the river Jordan was the start of his public ministry; our baptisms can be seen as new beginning in a community of faith. A new year is also a new beginning and is the reason many people make new year's resolutions.

This week in our staff meeting, we talked a bit about New Year's resolutions and someone on staff – who will remain nameless – said that they didn't want to disclose their resolutions because that way no one can remind them that they failed in a few weeks. We make resolutions because we see a chance at a new beginning, a chance to make some potentially needed changes in our lives.

A few years back, the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, Elizabeth Eaton, wrote an article titled: *"Baptism Begins a Real New Year."* In this article, she reflected on why we make New Year's resolutions saying, *"we sense that our lives are not entirely the way they should be ... There is a gap between who we are and who we have been created to be. So, we try to fill that gap ourselves and ... we make our New Year's resolutions. These resolutions might very well be worthy goals and they might be beneficial, but they can't fill the gap between who we are and who we know we should be."* Bishop Eaton goes on to say, *"In baptism, we have died the only death that really matters. The death of Christ Jesus into which we are buried is the end of death. It is the breaking of the power of sin. It is the beginning of our new life."* She concludes her article by encouraging us to: *"make New Year's resolutions if [we] want, but [to] understand that in baptism God has given us a new life, a new year, a new day. Freed from all of the emotional and spiritual energy that had been invested in the impossible task of freeing ourselves, we are now free to love God and serve the neighbor."*

Resolutions are up to us to set or not set... The great thing about our baptisms is that God is the one who welcomes us and promises us freedom and grace abundant. Through our baptisms, God frees us from trying to free ourselves. God gives us a new beginning that is rooted in Christ, and rooted in grace, not in the need to have perfection. We will possibly... probably... fail at our resolutions in the next few weeks. But God never fails us. God always keeps God's promises and helps us live into ours. And God is always there to welcome us back in when we fail. In this freedom, we can get back to doing what we should be wanting to do this year, things like: loving God, loving and accepting ourselves, serving our neighbor, sharing our faith, and striving for justice and peace in our world.

We see God's promises written so clearly in Mark's account of Jesus's baptism. Now, it is interesting that Mark talks more about John the Baptist than Jesus in this story, but it ultimately

points us to the most important and pivotal point of baptism. John was this odd character living disconnected from the established culture – wearing camel’s hair and a leather belt, eating locusts and honey. At this point in history, John had a large following of people wanting to come to him to be baptized – Jesus being one of those followers. John and Jesus’s stories are intertwined throughout their lives. Starting all the way back with their mothers supporting one another through their pregnancies. It is fitting, then, that John is the one who invites us into this new life and prepares the way for Jesus.

He comes out of the wilderness with a prophetic announcement: that he is “not worthy” to serve, in even a lowly manner, the one who will bring a new kind of baptism. John’s baptism had two components: repentance and forgiveness. People came to him confessing their sins and he then calls the people to faith through forgiveness. In Jesus’ baptism, however, everything changes. Nature itself is upended. The heavens are “torn apart.” All creation in the moment of Jesus’ baptism is altered. Out of that rupture comes the Holy Spirit in a form that is described as a dove. That dove does not simply land on Jesus or come near to him, because in the Greek, *eis auton* can mean that the dove actually came *into* him. He is infused with the Spirit from God. A new reality has come into the world, transforming all things seen and unseen.

In Jesus’ baptism it is the actions of the Spirit, rather than John’s cleansing, that affects the transformation of the baptized. The Spirit creates a profound change in us because we accept the invitation into a life of faith that God offers. The meaning of Jesus’ baptism for us is that we are baptized *into* something. A fundamental change takes place in baptism, at whatever age. An adult who is baptized after accepting God’s invitation is changed by responding in a life of faith, and an infant baptized into a family of faith will be brought up in that faith. Baptism is more than an individual act. In baptism we become part of a people. Part of a community.

This community is then set on a new path in this life, a new journey, a journey toward becoming more and more the people that God created us to be. So grateful for God’s invitation and initiation of love, we attempt to be God’s people as best we can. It is a journey with fits and starts, mistakes and sin; we stumble and fall. But we get up; we are forgiven; and we begin again. Thank God it is the Holy Spirit that guides us through all of this, who has the God-given task of helping us keep our promises and helping us become holy, of helping us strive to be more and more like Jesus. The Holy Spirit brings us into a church community, where we learn and grow together. Not always getting it right; but always trying to listen to God who is urging us forward into new life and a new community.

It’s important to recognize that it’s God invitation towards us that makes baptism sacred. We know that if it were up to us and dependent upon on our faith as humans, we would screw it up. But that’s the good news for us this day: God’s invitation is always open. It doesn’t matter if you have been baptized, if you are still wondering about it all, or if you see absolutely no point in it. God is always there to help us grow into who we are meant to be. God still loves each of us exactly where we are on our journeys.

It is the voice of our God, who spoke these beautiful words to Jesus: *"You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased."* These words are not just for Jesus. God is well pleased with us. Every single one of us. Just as we are. Isn't this a wonderful thing to remember and focus on at the beginning of a new year? Instead of focusing on what is wrong with us, on what we need to improve, and then feeling crummy when we fail at something else, let's focus on the amazing truth that we are already God's beloved children. Imagine what a difference that would make if we all did that – began this year, and each new day, by reminding ourselves that we are God's beloved children.

As a response to the word and as a celebration of this good news, that's what we are going to do today... remember God's precious love for each of us. As you come forward to receive communion, there will be someone holding a bowl of water. If you want, you can dip your finger in the bowl and make the sign of the cross on your forehead, on your hand, or you can simply feel the water and remember this one, precious thing: that you are God's beloved child, with whom God is well pleased. Thanks be to God. Amen.