

1st Sunday after Epiphany
The Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ
Sermon – Patti Case
1.10.21

I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

In Biblical times, water was considered precious. It rains somewhere between 15 and 25 inches a year in and around Jerusalem, so water was collected and saved. Cherished. Any wonder the live-giving waters of the River Jordan are the setting for our gospel today?

We here in the Pacific Northwest get water. And the past couple of weeks we've seen more than our share. I've been trying to get out daily, rain or shine, to walk off some of my "COVID-19," and one of the games I play is to see how many steps it takes before another drip of water falls from the bill of my cap. My record is five steps, meaning after every five steps another drip released from the edge and plummeted to the ground. It's kind of a Zen thing - When it's raining so hard you really can't see the scenery, ya gotta do something to get through it, I guess.

But water is a beautiful thing, isn't it? it sustains life here on earth, and maybe elsewhere. It brings forth crops and moves ships, cleanses and purifies. It smothers the destructiveness of fire, soothes the muscles after a hard workout, reflects our beautiful surroundings.

Water can also be destructive. Flooding and landslides that we've seen close to home during the past weeks. Uprooted trees when water saturates the soil. Freeze-thaw cycles cracking sidewalks and dams and even bunkers. Creating and recreating, destroying and defacing rocks, one grain of sand at a time.

Many Northwest writers point out the dozens of words we have for rain. From mist to downpour, from showers to pelting rain, only a region that experiences such subtleties – and so much of it – can share such a vocabulary.

Our gospel describes a scene where crowds of people, described as Judaeans and Jerusalemites or, as we surmise, almost all Jews, are baptized by this funny man in his rough clothing. This despite the fact that previously, only Gentiles were subjected to baptism – Jews were already considered people of God and didn't need to go through this ritual. Yet here we are: John admonishes these Jews to repent their sins, and sure enough, they line up and succumb to the waters.

John promises his audience one better than this ritual cleansing with water. "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," he tells the Jews. What could be better than life-giving, soothing, precious water? The Holy Spirit.

Since I listened to the Advent podcasts I shared with all of you, I've been fascinated by this notion of being washed clean daily. Every day. Not once a year when we renew our baptismal vows, not even once a week when we recite the Nicene Creed, but daily. We wake up, we say hello to our Savior and BOOM. Washed clean.

In preparation for this homily, I read through the baptismal covenant each morning this past week. As I did so, I imagined those life-giving waters, a placeholder for the Holy Spirit which descends like a dove.

It's a dove, so I didn't imagine a hailstorm. I imagine a gentle, soaking rain. One to which I can raise my face and be washed clean.

Through baptism, we are identified as children of God. As the Dutch priest Henri Nouwen wrote, "I am the chosen child of God, precious in God's eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity and held safe in an everlasting embrace."

It's all well and good to be held in God's safe and loving arms, but our baptismal covenant also requires something of us. In coming weeks we'll hear more about discipleship – what it means to be a child of Christ. But let's review what we agree to when we are baptized:

We agree to continue learning and growing in our Christian faith. We agree to break bread, to pray, to try to resist evil and to repent and return to the Lord when we do fall into sin. And sure, we can cover that through our Sunday trips to church – or to virtual church, in our case. But our covenant goes deeper, doesn't it? We're called to share the Good News, both in word and in example. We're called to love our neighbors – all our neighbors – as ourselves. We're called to seek justice and peace, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

As we've all experienced the isolation of this pandemic, perhaps we've forgotten some of our good habits. Instead of getting out for a breath of fresh air and a walk, we've become couch potatoes, sinking into that easy chair and letting our muscles atrophy.

Is it possible that our baptismal covenant is experiencing similar disuse? Maybe it will help to think more drastically. Immersion, drowning rather than a gentle rain. Not a proverbial drink from a firehose, but a literal one. Perhaps the image we should carry is of dying and being raised up, gasping for air, suddenly and miraculously filled with the breath of God. Now: You've come back from the brink. What are you motivated to do? Tune in to church on Sunday? Or is there something more?

We must live out our baptismal covenant daily - with God's help, as the response states. That means daily alignment with God and the Sacred, coming to a recognition that God's presence surrounds us and sustains us wherever we may be, physically or spiritually. It requires daily self-scrutiny and self-reflection, striving to let the Spirit of Christ inform our every move. And it requires daily embodiment. In the sacrament of baptism, God sets the Spirit free within our souls. But in order for the power of the Spirit to be fulfilled, it's up to every single one of us to set that spirit free out in the world. That's hard. But I will, with God's help.

Like many of you, I watched last week's attack on our nation's capitol with so much emotion. I listened to many friends of mine, members of Congress and staffers, describe the fear and horror they experienced. I wondered, "what's next?" as I contemplated the ignominious end of one presidential term and hoped for renewal in the next.

I can't get the image of Richard Barnett out of my mind - sitting with his feet on Speaker Nancy Pelosi's desk. And yet, as I return to my baptismal covenant, it is my job to respect the dignity of every human being. To love our neighbors as ourselves. To pray for Richard Barnett and the other perpetrators just as I pray for the victims. That's REALLY hard. But I will, with God's help. So while it is easy to follow along with others and condemn the acts of desecration, maybe that's akin to baptizing with water. What's the additional step we must take to realize our baptism in the Holy Spirit? Presiding Bishop Michael Curry pointed out last week that love is not about turning a blind eye to the wrong. But he asked us to go out

and bless somebody. "Bless somebody you disagree with," he said." Bless somebody you agree with.... Go out and bless somebody by listening to their story and their life....Be an instrument of God's peace, an agent of God's love. "

Though he's not fit to tie his sandals, John baptizes Jesus. The Spirit descends like a dove and a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Our baptismal covenant carries that power. The power to tear apart the heavens, to leash 40 days of flooding waters on the earth, to push the Red Sea aside. As Paul states in Romans 6:3 and 5: " Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

But remember also that we have work to do. In Mark's gospel, Jesus went immediately from "You are my Beloved" to being tempted by Satan for 40 days. From there, he faces a man with an unclean spirit, a woman with a fever and a steady stream of others who require miracles from him.

We, too, are so empowered. And it's hard. Sometimes it's so hard. Fog, mist, gentle rain, downpour, flood, fire hose. We will, with God's help. Oh, yes, we will.

Let's close with the prayer of "Thanksgiving Over the Water" from the Order of Baptism. Those of you at home may want to follow along in your prayer books, starting on page 306:

"We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.

We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Amen.