

1st Sunday of Epiphany “Baptized into Christ” Romans 6 4

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

This is the season of Epiphany; we stand between the great festivals of Incarnation and Resurrection – looking forward and back. We just completed the Christmas season with its gift giving and receiving traditions. Of course, Jesus is the gift to us, given at Christmas and Epiphany is when we get to unwrap it slowly, marveling at each facet of this gem. But we look ahead – toward the fulfillment of God’s promises in Holy Week and Easter.

We definitely want to connect this to our baptism, because Luke does so. Jesus is clearly shown to have the Spirit and then John tells us that Jesus baptizes us with that Spirit and fire.

Jesus receives the Spirit here and this is the beginning of His ministry. Jesus is impelled by that Spirit through temptation and into the broken lives of people, serving, forgiving, healing, helping, feeding, etc.

Our words and deeds, since our baptism, are filled with the potential given by the Spirit and the fire of God. Little things, like embers blown on the wind, can set ablaze big things. The Spirit of God is in control of this; we are not.

Now Herod looks like someone in today’s broken world. He has flouted every social convention and moral boundary, but he still succeeds. He gets to be king. The good folk, the people who keep the rules, get stomped upon. It is an upside-down world. Until, that is, a man shows up in the line to get baptized by John and something different happens. The heavens open, the Spirit descends, and a voice is heard. This is God’s Son! This time something different will happen.

So, we come to church, we have spoken our confirmation vows, we serve on the committees, and take our turn teaching Sunday School. Our offerings seem like they are never enough. Our congregation dwindles. Our ministry seems to be in a downward trajectory. Will it crash in a few years? But isn’t this really looking to the wrong places and expecting answers from the wrong sources?

But as our Gospel lesson tells us, the heavens have opened, the Spirit descended, and the voice spoke. Jesus has and gives the Spirit which the Church needs. He lights our fires, warming our hearts, powering our service, and clearing the path before us. This is His ministry. He bears those burdens. He brings Spirit and Fire. The words and deeds of God's Baptized people are the way His kingdom comes and His will gets done. Do not undersell yourself as a vessel of the Spirit. Count on and trust in Him!

Our own baptism is also at play here. We are baptized into this Jesus, made one with the One who stood in Jordan's flood. We are called as His children and thus His heirs, heirs of his eternal life.

Christ has divine authority to forgive sins. As it says in the 1st chapter of Paul's letter to the Hebrews, "1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Christ's Holy Spirit continues to convey the presence of Christ to us today. As the body of Christ, this is also, in a sense, our anointing with the Spirit, an anointing which would be recapitulated at Pentecost.

Christ Jesus, present through that Spirit, is still authoritatively forgiving sins today. Jesus, anointed, is not just a past event, but a present event every time we, in that same Spirit, actualize the kingdom of God through sacramental action. When we forgive sins, baptize, and commune, this Jesus shows up.

Jesus the beloved Son of God was found in the waters of repentance because He was bearing my sins and the sins of the whole world. This means our repentance is also connected to Him. Jesus, being the Son of God, empowered by the Spirit of God, would carry those sins to Good Friday and Easter morning, thus removing their crushing burden from our shoulders.

Jesus empowered by the Holy Spirit also then empowers us as witnesses. Our eyes are opened to see this Christ at work, we have a story to tell, that telling/proclamation of Christ's real and active kingdom here and now is not merely a bunch of weirdos telling a story, but it is an occasion for the Spirit of God to be at work.

This Jesus, who was present then, went up and out of these waters to a ministry of love and help to all who were in need. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, cared for the lonely and distressed. And He still does it through us and with us. Our lives of service have become lives lived for Him. This is how we join Jesus on His mission.

This now is starting to lead us to talk of what it means to be baptized people of God. What then does it mean that in our own baptism we have been united with this Jesus who stands in this penitential flood on our behalf? What does it mean that He who owns eternal life by right, now takes our death and exchanges it for His own life?

Our baptism is a baptism of repentance. As Paul will say in the Epistle reading today, we can no longer live in sin once we have died to it in these waters. Jesus' perfect repentance on this day empowers our own repentant life. We cannot leave our lives of sin by ourselves, but He can bring us forth from it.

Our Baptisms unite us with the one who legitimately can lay claim to the title "Son of God." That means we are God's children. And if we really are God's children, we are also His heirs. The heavenly mansion which awaits us is not a thing into which we will sneak, but a legally bestowed gift, an inheritance which we have not earned but legally, rightfully own.

You see, being baptized means a present reality – this is not just a future truth to which we look with expectation and joy, but a current reality as well. We are the children of God. Heaven in a sense does not wait.

Paul in these words explores the change, the actual difference, which is attributable to our baptisms. We are no longer the people who once wallowed in sin; now we are simply different people.

We died to that old way; now we live in a new way. Jesus has come into the flesh; we have been united with him in death, and He has participated in death with us so that in that darkness we might be found.

It is like a man diving into a pool of water. Jesus does not skim through the well-lit, upper layers of the human experience, the bright and sunny spots, but He dives all the way into the depths of our experience, the horrific death of a crucifixion, because it is down there in the cold, sepulchral depths of the human experience that He finds all of us. Death is the common denominator which unites rich and poor, black and white, male and female, slave and free. We all die. Jesus collects us there.

Of course, Jesus does not just find us there; He finds us and carries us out of that blackness. All of us who were buried with Him have been raised with Him. One of the hardest parts of this Christian life is that heaven actually begins right now, in the baptismal moment. We begin right then to be the temple of the Holy Spirit, the individual who is an heir of eternal life.

Right now, we are given a new life to live, a real life to live, a life which is empowered by the Spirit and which really can serve God. Now we are engaged. Jesus is found today in real water, submitting his real flesh and blood to a baptismal rite of repentance. Likewise, Paul says that our lives are occasions for us to really live the new life which God has created in us in Baptism, the life which is empowered by Christ, which is Christ in us (Gal. 2:20). Through us, the sacramentally working God, works in us. Our physical deeds are not devoid of meaning; in fact, the very nature of God's gracious act means that they are more meaningful, more important, and more precious to us. This is all done for you and in you and through you, without any merit or worthiness in you. Praise God!

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting.