

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA
The First Sunday of Advent: December 3, 2023
Jesus' Baptism
Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this first Sunday of Advent. We are, at times this Advent, using the translation from the Women's Lectionary. Since our scripture seems to be so male-centric, I hope to invite in some more of the female and lesser-known voices. Today, I have some interesting additions to our usual baptism story.

We will begin today by remembering that neither John nor Jesus invented baptism. It had been practiced for centuries among the Jews as a ritual equivalent to our Confession. Until the fall of the Temple in 70 A.D., it was common for Jewish people to use a special pool called a *Mikveh* -- literally a "collection of water" -- as a means of spiritual cleansing, to remove spiritual impurity and sin.

Men took this bath weekly on the eve of the Sabbath, women, monthly after their menstruation. Converts were also expected to take this bath before entering Judaism. Today Orthodox Jews still retain this rite.

John preached that such a bath was a necessary preparation for the world-changing event that would be wrought by the coming Messiah. Jesus would then transform this continuing ritual into the one single, definitive act by which we begin our Christian life of faith. In effect, after Jesus' own baptism, as noted by John, Jesus would fuse His Divine Essence with the water and therefore the ceremony would continue in a new way - through the Holy Spirit.

Most of us who understand who Jesus was may ask, "Why did Jesus, the sinless Son of God, receive the "baptism of repentance" meant for sinners?" The strange answer begins in an apocryphal book called, *The Gospel according to the Hebrews*. It is here that we learn Jesus received the baptism of John to please his mother and relatives. Yes, even in Jesus' baptism, there were women involved!

Besides trying to please his mother, Jesus' baptism by John was also Jesus' acceptance and the beginning of his mission as God's suffering Servant. He allowed himself to be numbered among sinners. Jesus submitted himself entirely to his Father's will as the church claims, but maybe I should reframe this statement to include his mother's will as well.

Jesus received John's baptism to identify himself with his own people, who, as a result of John's preaching, for the first time in Jewish history, became aware of their sins and of their need for repentance besides the offering of livestock to the temple. The Jews had the traditional belief that only the Gentiles who embraced the Jewish religion needed the baptism of repentance, for, as God's chosen people, the Jewish race was already holy.

Jesus' baptism, in a way, was Jesus now being proclaimed as the Son of God, being intimately identified with anyone who wants to have a relationship with the Divine. It was out of love that he consented to his baptism. Out of love he left his divinity aside to be part of his people and part of his creation.

Jesus' baptism by John was a mystical experience that Jesus felt deep within his soul, at a crucial turning point of his life. The opening of the Heavens with Holy Spirit descending as a dove upon Jesus, and the voice declaring, "This is My beloved Son with Whom I am well pleased," are God's revelation to mankind of

the Mystery that He is Triune. The presence of the Triune God at this baptism, reveals Jesus' true identity and mission. We have present, God the creator, Jesus the son, and the dove of the Holy Spirit. It is the first understanding that God is complex.

The heavens' opening also indicates that this was a moment of God's powerful intervention in human history and in the life of his now-claimed Son. It was a moment for God to re identify and renew the covenant with his people in their Godward movement away from the Temple priests and their payment and judgment process. A movement that allowed people to inwardly and outwardly receive grace from God without involving the Temple.

For Jesus it was also a moment of decision. It marked the end of Jesus' private life, which had prepared him for his public ministry, and now coming up out of the water he is called to battle and conquer evil. And as we know, in the wilderness Jesus will acknowledge and rebuke the daily sins and struggles of human life.

The baptism of Jesus reminds us of who we are, our identity and mission. By Baptism we become the adoptive sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus, members of his Church, heirs of Heaven and temples of the Holy Spirit. We become incorporated into the Church, the Body of Christ, and made sharers in the priesthood of Christ. Hence baptism is the beginning of the Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit and the door which gives access to the other Sacraments.

In the Church we are called to share the same intimate connection with others as with Christ; we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. We are called to be co-creators with God in building up the "Kingdom of God" on earth, a Kingdom of compassion, justice and love.

Although we are not baptizing anyone this Sunday, I remind you that should you need to feel renewed, there is always blessed water in our font as you enter the sanctuary. You too can renew your baptismal covenant, receive the gifts you need to serve, and commune more closely with God – with just a dab or two at the font.

Please join me at this time to reaffirm your faith as we begin Advent. The response, as I am sure you know, is “I will with God’s help.”

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers? I will with God’s help.

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord? I will with God’s help.

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
I will with God’s help.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
I will with God’s help.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of all human beings? I will with God’s help.

We will, with God’s help, work at becoming the people we are truly meant to be.

Welcome to Advent. Amen