

Today, Jesus gets baptised. We are presented with a scene - I always imagine that it is high summer time in the warm dry climate Jesus lived - not too much vegetation beyond scrub brush, except down by the river. There, the trees are in full leaf, the sky is clear blue, and the mid-morning sun kisses everything with yellow light - it will certainly turn more oppressive as the the great light in the sky climbs higher towards the afternoon, - but at the moment it isn't too hot and the colors in everything are at their most vibrant.

John the Baptist stands waist deep in the Jordan River, addressing a small group of people who stand on the shore - men and women, some of whom hang on his words, some look with skepticism, and others are ready to jump into the water.

On this particular day, Jesus is there, and approaches John to be baptized. John is confused, because the baptism of John was about the repentance of sins. The Son of God, who is supposed to have no sin, would have no need for such a ritual. However, Jesus tells John that his baptism was necessary to "fulfill all righteousness," (whatever that means). John finds Jesus explanation satisfying, and agrees to baptise Jesus.

As soon as he does, the clear blue sky opens - a black tear that looks like the night sky, a deep darkness dotted with stars - and out comes a dove - or something that looks like a dove, that flies down just before landing on Jesus dissolves into a pocket of radiant light that descends into Jesus, and suddenly he glows more gloriously than the sun. Out of the tear in the sky comes a commanding voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Then sky closes, the radiant light fades, and everyone who witnessed this scene by the river packs up and goes about their day. For Jesus, this is the beginning of his ministry.

That is an absolutely fantastic scene. But what does any of it mean? What difference does it make the moment we are out those doors walking to our cars and having checked the "church" box, moving on with our day?

To try and answer that, I would like to explore and unpack that brief scene that only gets a couple dozen words in our gospel reading, and even less in our societies collective imagination.

Jesus is the Son of God, and God delights in him. Jesus hasn't earned this love. He hasn't done any miracles yet - all he does is show up and get baptised. Sound familiar? It should sound like...you. Me. And everyone else who gets baptised. None of us has done any miracles. But that doesn't matter to God - God delights in all those he loves. What Jesus did here was set a precedent by the way that he was open to and connected to that love, that power, shown in dramatic fashion. And just as important, when the opened sky and radiant dove appear to fade, they are never absent, as we see Jesus continue to draw on this divine source of energy and direction throughout his ministry.

The dramatic fireworks - a voice from heaven, a dove bolting down, radiating divine light, enveloping Jesus in the water, infusing with Jesus' body so now he radiates that divine light - it is a fantastic image. One we would do well to meditate on. But being struck by wonder is just a first step: what we are struck by is something that is merely out-of-the ordinary in order to get our attention.

The story is trying to show us something, something that can't really be seen - the real power, the real magic, if you will, is inside. It is in the intention and openness of Jesus. In the life. In the hope. In the Good News. Which by the way, if the Gospel isn't good news, we aren't reading it right. Just a little tidbit to keep in mind the next time someone quotes scripture at you or we are doing Dwelling in the Word.

Jesus was fully open to the Good News. Jesus was open to God in his baptism. And when we are baptised, something similar happens. We open ourselves - or at least we try to open ourselves to the love and promise of God. Or we promise on behalf of one too young to do this themselves, to support them in being open to the love and promises of God.

In baptism we approach the divine well, hoping to find God and to be found. And in that graced moment perhaps to find ourselves as well. The real us. The us that knows that life is good, that breath is sweet, that love is the one true virtue that holds all things together.

As the Son of God, Jesus was in touch with that connection to this warm, inner, God given and God-blessed self all the time. It fed him, loved him, sustained him, called him to do the good work of love, witness, and reconciliation in the world. Jesus was not at war with himself the way the rest of us find that we so often are.

Unfortunately, the rest of us relate more with Paul than Jesus, who wrote elsewhere about the divide in himself, doing the things he didn't want to do, and unable to do the good he wanted to do.

As we journey to find God in ourselves, and in our loved ones, and in those we struggle to love, we face the reality that we are not always in touch with that gem of God given life that animates our souls. We forget that radiant life that rests in the center of our reality, always just behind our minds eye - the very core of our consciousness.

That disconnection, that forgetting, or dismissing of our God-given life and love. That not connecting with living grace - whether we want to and can't, or simply don't want to - *that* is what sin really is. Whenever we use the word sin in our liturgy, that being separated from God and our inner selves is what we should be thinking about, not an impossible list of rules that no one really follows anyway.

Sin isn't just about failing to adhere to lists of archaic statutes - it is about forgetting God, ourselves, dismissing God and our inner selves and instead buying into fear or distraction, and abandoning the love of God that rests at our very core.

This disconnection is *the* basic human problem that faces all of us - whether we self-identify as religious or not. And in baptism, we reach out to God and ask for help finding our way back. And we believe that she can help us, and that she does.

I think it is all-to-easy to recite the Baptismal Covenant in light of an immature and destructive understanding of certainty and nit-picky rule following. So I would like to share with all of you one way to approach the words we will shortly gather to reaffirm in light of everything I just shared.

The Baptismal Covenant begins with me asking you, "Do you believe..." And you all reply, "I believe..." Now, the truth is that some days you may only be able to honestly say, "I want to believe," and that is ok. I am right now exercising my authority as a priest in the Episcopal Church to give you permission to really lean into "I want to believe," especially if you really know that you don't.

If you approach the reaffirmation of vows this way, here is what it might sound like:

I want to believe in God, and his son Jesus, conceived by the holy spirit, who was tortured, killed, and rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and will one day judge all things with grace, love, and finality. I want to believe that.

I want to believe in the Holy Spirit - I mean, wouldn't it be nice if there was one Spirit in all the various churches, beyond our narrow definition of church - wouldn't it be great if all those who died before us live with Christ and we could commune with them and see them enfleshed again one day?

I want to believe... that my inability to stay in touch with who I truly am isn't permanent, and that God can overcome and heal the damage I've done to my own heart - and the hearts of those I love.

I want to believe... in a future embodied existence - after all, that is the only way I understand existence now.

I want to stay connected to God and the community of the faithful through prayer and gathering for Eucharist, tapping into that great mystery and life that holds us all together.

I want to persevere in resisting evil - not caricatures of evil, but whatever it is that seems to turn us against ourselves and each other - and I want to return to this stance when I lose my way and get caught up in pre-occupation and distraction.

I want my faith to form who I am - how I think and see the world - in a way that inspires others to revisit their own intention and relationship with God and themselves.

I want to see God in all people - just as I long to see God in myself and in my own life.

I want to strive for justice and peace among all people - what else could be the logical culmination of all these things I just wanted for?

*That* is what baptism is about. And that is what reaffirming the baptismal covenant is about: reconnecting, remembering, reimagining, and leaning into the promise of God to help us.

Amen.