

Homily, St. Andrew's  
Baptism of Jesus (Proper 1B), Sunday, January 11, 2015  
Mark 1:4-11

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

This is my third baptism sermon in as many weeks. Baptism has been a rather significant theme through the Christmas season this year at St. Andrew's! On Christmas day we combined our celebration of Jesus' birth with baptism and last Sunday we combined our celebration of Epiphany - God's revelation to the Gentiles - with 2 baptisms. Baptisms are among the ministry opportunities that come to us by inquiry and request and there's little we can do to bring it them about except to be faithful, everyday, in our overall calling as the people of God. The circumstances this Christmas came about from inquiries and requests on the first weekend of December. Over roughly a 36-hour period around the first Sunday of Advent, Nov 30, I received 3 requests or inquiries about baptism. In the past week, one of those inquiries became a specific request and I've received another request since. These are all people we know... children and grand-children and great-grandchildren related to this parish and while none of them are currently actively involved, it still feels rather significant and more importantly - hopeful.

It's a season of reporting and reflecting on the year that's been so here are a few more statistics... Since coming to St. Andrew's, in just over 7 months, I've participated in 4 baptisms, 2 in 2014 and 2 in 2015, just last week. That means that on the first Sunday of 2015, we have already matched the number of baptisms from all of last year... which was an increase of 2 from 2013 when there weren't any baptisms recorded for St. Andrew's. By way of contrast, in those same 7 months, I've participated in 2 funerals here, though there were 4 in total in 2014. Now I'm not one to believe in numbers as the sole or necessarily even the primary means of understanding what's going on, but I do think they matter. And I certainly know that when I spend more time on baptisms than funerals, it impacts my own soul and perspective of ministry. I hope it does yours too. As I've been reflecting on all this this past week, I wonder if, more than the importance of baptizing the little ones who have come to us, *\*we\** are the ones being baptized. If that were the case, if as a parish and as individuals within it, we are being baptized, what might be its purpose? For what are you baptized and for what are we as the community of St. Andrew's being baptized?

Today, on this first Sunday after Epiphany, we mark the occasion of Jesus' baptism by John in the river Jordan. The stories of Jesus' baptism always seem a little strange. Mark's version, that we heard just a moment ago, is stripped down to the basics, as most of Mark's Gospel is... but still the story tells us that John proclaimed "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," and that the people who went to "out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan," were "confessing their sins." Jesus then appears with no introduction, just appears there along the Jordan and was baptized by John. There is no mention of confession or repentance, which makes sense, but then it also begs the question: "why, then, was Jesus baptized at all?" The response, the result, of the baptism, as told in the story, indicates that this is no mere "going through the motions of acceptability," for "as he was coming up out of the water,

he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" Something definitely happened - something important - at the baptism of Jesus, all the Gospels say so... so while baptism is certainly about the forgiveness of sin, it also must be about something more. For what was Jesus baptized? For what are you baptized and for what is the community of St. Andrew's being baptized?

According to international, ecumenical agreement at the World Council of Churches as published in the 1982 document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, "baptism is the sign of new life through Jesus Christ. It unites the one baptized with Christ and with his people." (2) It goes on to note 5 broad categories of images for baptism... they are: "participation in Christ's death and resurrection; conversion, pardoning and cleansing; the gift of the Holy Spirit; incorporation into the Body of Christ; the sign of the kingdom." Just for fun... which image or meaning resonates most with you and why... [ask for contribution... there is no right or wrong answer here...]

The image of baptism I've thought about this week is in uniting us to Christ in death and resurrection. The idea is that as we descend into the waters of baptism, we descend with Christ into death and as we rise out of the water, we are also united to Christ in resurrection and new life. As such, part of baptism is as a beginning of new and transformed life. The acute way in which this aspect of baptism has been present to us here at St. Andrew's is in relation to a variety of surgeries that have occurred recently... Most notably with Mathew Zachariah's kidney transplant surgery just over a week ago. He agreed that I could share with you some of a conversation he and I had last week about his journey to this moment. Mathew had been on the transplant list for 7 years and as the years wore on, he found peace in just living as well as he could for as long as he could, as the hope of actually getting a transplant faded over the years. More than that, at a certain age, people fall off the list and are no longer eligible for transplant and Mathew is 5 months away from that. In some very real ways, he was reconciled to death. Then on the 10th day of Christmas, a season of miracles, Mathew got a call - out of the blue - and received the gift of new life in the form of a kidney! What does this gift of new life mean for Mathew? He doesn't know yet... nobody can know yet... and that's okay. Recovery from any surgery certainly takes time and so does the discernment of the new calling and purpose that new life brings.

For what does Mathew have new life? For what was Jesus baptized? For what are you baptized and for what is the community of St. Andrew's being baptized? I can't say that I know the answer for us in any particularly concrete way. Rather than a fully developed plan or program what I have is inklings and observations and I feel a bubbling of possibility. I know that tender new shoots of renewal around music are starting to sprout with Nancy's energy and ideas and desire to come alongside the choir and the Sunday school to offer her gift of music leadership. I know that there are others in addition to Mathew who are getting a new lease on life with surgeries that not only fix a problem but offer renewed life with the fix. And I know that when we're baptizing, we are being offered new life... even if we don't fully know what it means yet.

In the poem "Little Gidding," the fourth of T.S. Eliot's "The Four Quartets," Eliot's wrote: "... And what you thought you came for; Is only a shell, a husk of meaning; From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled; If at all. Either you had no purpose; Or the purpose

is beyond the end you figured; And is altered in fulfilment..." It's a great poem - a great set of poems - and I love this little section because I think it describes so well the meaning of "sacrament." Sacraments, like baptism, are outside signs of inward grace that is bestowed upon us. The meaning of it we can only really know in hindsight - in our reflections about what has happened, how we have lived. It's not that we don't set out to fulfill the mission to which we think God calls us but rather that it is only in the setting out - in the living out - of the purpose to which we are called, that we can know its meaning. And it is a meaning, a purpose, that will surely be beyond the end we figured, beyond what we can ask or imagine.

As we continue to live through the story of Jesus this year... from promise to birth, through baptism and calling, amongst struggles and questions and betrayal, beyond suffering and death into resurrected and transformed life... may we seek to know for what we are baptized. And most importantly, as we set out, may our place of beginning be God's words of blessed and acceptance: "You are my [child], my Beloved; with you I am well pleased."