

Baptism of Jesus Sermon, January 11, 2009

Lections: Genesis 1:1-5; Ps. 29, Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

I am hoping that you come to the beginning of this New Year refreshed and not frenzied. I am aware that it may not be true for you, with the ongoing bus strike, the bitter cold predicted for this week, job or health concerns for you or others you love. In the parish we are looking at the first draft of a budget process that requires more money from us in a time of economic uncertainty. We are asking that priorities be adjusted and that “first things” be put first. For Christian communities we sort out what matters on a regular basis; we look at our commitments; we begin at the beginning.

So we have our first lesson from Genesis about water and soon we look at the water Jesus entered for his baptism. It seems that he was ready for a beginning, and a ritual way to initiate this ministry of his. For John the Baptist, this ritual was one of repentance, turning away from the past and turning toward God, a cleansing of the soul. For Paul in the lesson from Acts we have an extension of baptism to include the power of the Spirit, a ritual marked by signs and wonders. For Jesus whom we are told by the church needs no repentance and will eschew signs and wonders as a definition of himself, the baptism is about aligning himself with the human community. His baptism is, for me, a deepened commitment to the relationship with God and with all others. This is a first things first event and it is our model as well. That ordering of priorities should refresh our souls.

In the art of this event, the paintings are curious and interesting. In some Jesus is in the water of the Jordan only up to his ankles and that is a true reflection of the depth of the headwaters. In other paintings he is in up to his knees or mid thigh; in others up to his chest. In one small painting the waters leap to meet him along with the fish. I see these visuals as a challenge to our own commitments to God and to each other – to parish, diocesan and world needs. How deep are you in? What does your faith require of you in terms of your financial resources? Does the river of baptism continue to rise up and claim you, reminding you of your status as beloved and blessed children of God? Does this river of faith remind us of the work of faith God is putting before us?

I am told that churches here seldom talk about money – as a subject it is left to folks to discern giving in private. The budget in this parish has been set based on what comes in rather than setting goals and challenges and then asking for the support needed to initiate new ministries as well as pay the necessary nonflexible fees for priest and staff, building needs and commitments to others. I believe that I can trust this parish to know what is an opportunity to deepen your commitment. I have heard that you respond well to a crisis, to the roof or the kitchen project, with needs met sometimes within a week. That tells me that you have the resources to also choose to be proactive in addition to reacting faithfully to emergency needs. It would be wonderful to come to the vestry (annual meeting) refreshed in spirit and confident in faith rather than frenzied and anxious.

We run a quarter of a million dollar budget here and that takes quite a lot of commitment from all of you. For several years this parish’s fair share to the diocese has not been met. While the theft in 2007 impacted the giving, we are over that now with the monies

restored by the insurance. Yet we ended the year with a deficit and will face a larger one for 2009 unless we rise to the challenge. This parish came quite close to not affording a full time priest; it came quite close to a different form of ministry. I believe in maintaining our good relationship with the diocese and beyond the diocesan borders; we have an important obligation to meet. For 2009 we are asked for \$20,000, about a tenth of our budget, a tithe. The diocesan budget is impacted by our paying our fair share; about 45% of the diocesan funds go to outreach ministries like Center 454, the Well and Cornerstone as well as to the Primate's Fund for World Relief and Development. While some of you give individually to these efforts, if all the monies given were put into pledge form we could meet our fair share. We could be confident that we are helping our diocese use the funds in combination with others for the greater good. I will recommend that we ask for emergency needs twice a year and help strengthen what priorities we are already a part of in relationship with other parishes.

When was the last time you increased your pledge by even a percent or two? Our cost of living expenses go beyond the same level of giving as in years past. Are you willing to consider giving more as a sign of a new beginning this year? Jesus' baptism is set by Mark in the larger intent of God's purposes in the world. My hope, my conviction, is that this body of faith will get a little deeper into the water of faith, meeting its obligations to relationships that extend our tending and mending of the creation. Our financial pledges are legacy gifts; they say what matters to us. They shine as a manifestation in the season of Epiphany. How deep are you in?

If each parishioner gave \$200/month we would meet our budget.; we could meet our commitments. If some gave more we could initiate new ministry using that marvelous kitchen for children who no longer get home ec classes, for healthy eating, safety, caring for others. God might say that is a pleasing thing; the heavens might open for us and for others.

This parish has a tradition of blessing chalk with which to mark the household thresholds as reminders of commitment. This comes from the Jewish tradition as the Shema prayer is affixed to homes, and I am thinking it also comes from the Orthodox patterns. I sign the year this way +2+0+0+9+ with the cross at the beginning, in the middle and at the end. May this year for us be a refreshment of faith and of blessing. Amen. So be it.

The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera