

January 10, 2010 Baptism of Christ

Lections: Isaiah 43:1-7; Ps. 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17;21,22

Thousands of men and women in a variety of uniforms took part in a civic liturgy this week as they walked together to honor the life of Ottawa police officer Constable Eric Czapnik. Their solidarity offered an incredible witness for their vocational call of serving the public good. Family members, police and other officials told the world that his life made a difference. And we pause to honor his chosen path, one that was grounded in the faith of his Polish Catholic church.

I am remembering another son of Poland, Lech Wolenska, the leader of the Solidarity movement whose personal and communal course of action was fueled by faith and justice. He received a Nobel Peace Prize and wrote an autobiography, A Way of Hope. In it he says, “We Poles are exposed to influences from all sides and life forces us to choose, to verify, to experience for ourselves and them to assert ourselves and draw from within ourselves, the necessary moral strength to affect change. Though we are caught in the vise of a fossilized system, a production of an outdated partition of our planet, in August, 1980, we overthrew an all powerful political taboo and proclaimed the dawning of a new era.” Actions were taken that required moral courage, faith seeking justice, choosing a response that stands for something not just 30 years ago but as an example today.

We could say that the baptism of Christ is the dawning of the new era of the power of the Spirit in human community. The texts also ask us to think about choice, God’s choice of us in the Isaiah passage, and humanity’s response. We watch Jesus join a long line of people who knew brokenness in nations, in societies, and in themselves. In an act of incredible solidarity Jesus takes his place alongside us. The church wants us to know that his ministry emerges from this baptismal time. He will not escape the tragic structures of the world; systemic injustice and violence surround him too. But, by handing himself over, something real and new is breaking in; a new age of the Spirit loose in the world is at hand.

It is clear that for Luke the life and work of the church is to parallel the life and work of Jesus. The mission and ministry emerge from our baptismal waters and promises. These creedal behaviors keep us in solidarity with God’s yearnings and with each other. That is why we renew our vows even when we have no candidates for baptism. Sometimes I think that the sprinkling isn’t enough – like plants, we need regular doses of water to grow.

For several years I served a large congregation (1000 members) where we followed a pattern of designating five services each year as time for baptisms; otherwise we would be baptizing all the time!! The five especially appropriate times are: the baptism of Jesus, the Easter Vigil, Pentecost, All Saints, and during a bishop’s visit. We always had a crowd of families for these services – babies, family and friends. Some wouldn’t come to church those Sundays because the service might be a little long; as if the gift of faith in those gathered was not worth the time it took to enfold them. God knows who those

baptized might be called to be and how their faith lives would shape the world, serve the common good, catch some of the Spirit's fire for ministry and mission.

We have no crowds waiting in line for baptism this morning. But we are reminded that just two weeks ago we had a baby in the manger and now he has jumped into the line. Most of us took our places in line as infants but some here remember their baptismal waters. The texts from Luke suggest that it is as adults that we will be called to learn what such a choice means. For Jesus it was an invitation to pray, to uncover what might be revealed in him and for the world. Baptism became for the early church a way to push boundaries, to welcome all people even those Samaritans and other Gentiles. To begin a new calendar year and a new church season with this claim of lives marked as Christ's own forever is a challenge and a good thing. We need the blessing of faith that the Spirit gives as we offer ourselves again for the work of our vocations.

Even in the face of death we are in solidarity. Today, like every day, there is a challenge for us to live our baptisms, to bring new life and fresh faith to this parish so that we may serve the world. I challenge even those whose baptismal waters were long ago and may have dried up, to choose again this day whose servant you will be. In kind and in particular we belong to God and to each other. Touched and controlled by many forces in the world, we, the baptized, stand for something precious. Baptism, and a life handed over for God to use, is still the most radical act I know. (Here I was joined by a parishioner leaving on Tuesday from Hungary to drive medical supplies to Mali, a poor country in Africa; he spoke of solidarity, service; we promised our prayers of support).

From our psalm this morning, May the Lord give strength to the people and bless all with peace. Amen+

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