



Pastor Ken's Sermon

January 10, 2021

1st Sunday after Epiphany and Baptism of Our Lord

(Mark 1:4-11 and Romans 6:11-11)

In ten days, our Nation will inaugurate a president. Normally such occasions are quite full of fanfare – parades, speeches, and balls. But the focus is on the solemnity and taking of the oath – which is quite brief by comparison. Since 1789 this is how our nation's elected leader begins a term of office. Our Lord's baptism was an inauguration day of sorts. He publicly entered his office as the Messiah of God and began on that day to call men and women into his something he called "the Kingdom of God."

Our story from Mark describing our Lord's baptism is also remarkably brief. In fact, the description of John the Baptist's attire and diet merit nearly as many words as Jesus' dip in the Jordan river. (Which, when you stop to think about it, makes the comparison to an inauguration day quite apropos – how much time after all is spent dissecting a president's inaugural speech compared to the reviews of the gowns worn at the evening balls or the menu.)

Baptism needs little defense of its importance – Christians believe it is our inauguration into the Kingdom of God and is the cornerstone upon which our church and our lives rest – as Paul says in Ephesians 4:5 – "*there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism*". But baptism can't be stressed enough as to what it means to the person baptized. First, consider that in his baptism our Lord was largely indistinguishable from the crowds that had come to hear John, and by wading into the Jordan a ways Jesus wades into the sins of those very same people – ditto for you and me. It was an act of obedience to his Father and an act of remarkable solidarity with sinners.

Yet, the Baptism of our Lord is the first time in the Bible the Holy Trinity is revealed clearly. A voice from heaven – God the Father, declares his pleasure in Jesus the Son, then ratifies that relationship by the descent upon Jesus of the Holy Spirit. To be sure, baptism is a human act – so human and so common that we easily miss all the divinity in it.

In fact, that is what Mark seems to suggest when he reports that Jesus alone saw the Spirit descend on him, and infers that Jesus alone heard the voice of approving pleasure of his Father. Apparently only Jesus knew that this was his inauguration day – the others we assume just go home, or in the case of John, keep on preaching and baptizing. The divinity of it all Mark keeps a secret until our Lord's crucifixion, when by a Roman Centurion of all people Jesus is confessed as the Son of God by the way he died – in triumph, as though this is what he wanted.

Inaugurations are the beginning of things, not the culmination of things. It's when the work gets started for the inaugurated, which if our baptism be the same as our Lord's, and it is, then it's our inauguration day too. And Paul says in our epistle lesson today it's vital we don't keep that a secret. For the very first Christians, baptism was the transformative divine event in their lives.

There was a man called Cyril, a bishop in Jerusalem in the 4th century. From him we have a description of how people were baptized in his churches. In those days, it began with teaching – quite a lot of it Cyril said "*in order that the baptized may know the effect wrought upon them...and*

the symbolical meaning of the things which were to be performed.” Cyril tells us then that in the evening before they were baptized, candidates assembled by the church facing west, where the sun disappears into the darkness, and they renounced Satan.

This is their declaration of personal independence. Cyril described it like this, *“I fear your power no longer, for Christ has overthrown it...and I renounce thee.”* Then, Cyril says, the candidate is *“delivered from the devil’s pomp”* (the culture of entertainment and accumulation of pleasure of the surrounding world), *“the madness of the theatre and the horse races.”* Does any of this sound vaguely familiar?

Then, the next morning at sunrise they reassembled, facing east, and the candidates confess the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the one true God. This public act of a change of allegiance from darkness to light, from sin to holiness, from Satan to God, Cyril expressed by saying *“you have put off the old man and clothed yourself in the garment of salvation”* – then entering the church they were submersed in the water three times, signifying how our Lord lay in his tomb three days – how we are as Paul said *“buried with Christ by baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life.”*

“Let no one suppose”, Cyril wrote, *“that baptism is merely the grace of forgiveness of sins or adoption as sons (and daughters) of God. Baptism he said; “ministers to us the gift of the Holy Spirit”* and so, *“just as Christ went forth from his to stand against and defeat the adversary, so too are you, after baptism to do the same.”* Whew! What can we say? In ten days, our nation will observe an inauguration. As it has been at other inaugurations, our nation could be described as divided politically. Today, a divided Christianity quarrels about baptism. As with politics, no side is completely correct I’m afraid. Baptism conveys two things – two gifts – the Father’s grace and the Spirit’s power.

Sadly, churches have torn these two apart in word play galore. Now we have the spectacle of some baptizing casually, with little preparation or call for commitment, and some who innovate unnecessarily and even self-servingly with a holy ritual of the sort Cyril described. Other churches are so intent to “see” some holiness in candidates that they forget baptism is always, always, first an act of God. They lose sight of the fact grace comes to sinners who always, always depend, for everything, on the mercy of God in Christ. And let’s not even get started on the amount of water involved and what should get wet shall we?

What shall we say? What the church has always said – baptism is meant to be our personal inauguration day in which we promise, under grace, to “preserve and defend” the cause of Christ and pledge that from that day and for each one thereafter, we will faithfully execute our covenant and follow no rival lords nor give them our allegiance – so help us God. AMEN