

“Why Was Jesus Baptized?”
A sermon preached at Keenan Chapel
by the Very Reverend Timothy Jones
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
January 13, 2018 / Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

If you live with a child,
if you know someone who has lived with a child,
you know that children,
for all their innocence, are not perfect.

They have sometimes stubborn wills that do not
notice or care about the needs of others.
They can be precious, but also exasperating.

One of the first words
our children must hear from us is NO!
They share in the human condition.

The Church calls this condition *original sin*.

We are born into a world
that is bent away from God.
Inherited sin was introduced into the world,
according to the story in Genesis,

as Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit of the
tree of knowledge of good and evil.

In some ways, there's nothing original about
original sin,
that's how common, pervasive it seems.

We inherit tendencies that corrupt our capacities
to do good.

Our thought, reason, will, imagination
become distorted and we
attack others, hurt ourselves.

We do bad things we regret later,
that at the time we deceived ourselves into
thinking were perfectly okay.

Augustine said that our free will is weakened by
this human state.

People who struggle with addiction know this
vividly, as the addiction seems to rob the addict
of an ability to resist, of the strength to choose.

Some have called this condition we share systemic sin, that is, we are born into a world with structures and institutions that perpetuate harm and pain and injustice.

We get caught up in them.
The church itself and people in churches do terrible things.

This tendency toward the bad is in the headlines and in the movies. On the streets with dealers and human traffickers, in our homes when we snap at our dear ones. in our hearts when we ignore God or rebel and turn away from his guidance.

There's truth in the prayer book collect,
Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners

One afternoon Jill was getting exasperated with our then-three-year old daughter.

Finally, in frustration she said,
Bekah, why did you do that?!

She looked at Jill,
and without a pause to think, said,
Because I have naughties in my badness.

We are born into a world of badness
and we add our own “naughties” to it.

Jesus, of course, was born
into a world of where sin was part of things.
His coming did not somehow hold him back from
these grubby, hurtful realities.

Today’s Gospel drives that home.
Have you ever wondered why he was baptized?
The sinless Son of God baptized by the prophet?
That act shows that Jesus understood the full
implications of becoming a human person.
He came to live in that world, with its temptations
and self-centeredness.

He came to join us in this world with
its pull toward sin, the hurtful gesture,
the mean reply, the indifference to God.

Jesus joined the people lined up along the sides
of the Jordan River waiting to be baptized.
He chose to identify with people like us.

As one writer put it,
“Jesus simply got in line with everyone who had
been broken by the “wear and tear” of this selfish
world and had all but given up on themselves and
their God. ...

At his baptism, he identified with the damaged
and broken people who needed God.”

David L. Bartlett. Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1: Advent through
Transfiguration . Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

That word *Epiphany* means literally,
a revealing, an appearance.

This Sunday of Epiphany not only has to do with
Jesus’ coming and revealing.

It also focuses on the baptism of Jesus.

And it makes sense to celebrate his baptism
because his baptism was one of the ways he
launched his ministry.

His submitting to baptism is part of his epiphany,
his revealing, to the world.

And it is here also that we see something
miraculous indeed about his coming.

I don't mean the miracles
that accompanied his birth.

I mean, given his divine identity,
the miracle of his coming at all.

In Jesus God was willing to become vulnerable,
to share the mess humans have made of the world.

God comes to wade into the muddy
waters of our existence.

I've seen the Jordan River,
where Jesus was baptized.

It's not like the teal blue
transparent water of the Caribbean.

No, it's greenish brown.

When Jesus comes to John the Baptist expecting
to be baptized, John, not surprisingly,
protested, “I need to be baptized by you,
and do you come to me?”

But Jesus insisted.

John agreed finally and thrust Jesus into the
brown water just like everyone else there.

Jesus, Son of God, humbled himself.

And did something for us.

All that is captured in our own baptisms,
which we do well to reflect on regularly.

Baptism represents our commitment
to live for God, to live in his ways and will.

But more importantly, given our natures,
given the inevitability of our failing sometimes,

it marks God’s commitment to us.

A commitment lived out in Jesus’ baptism.

A commitment given vivid expression as we too
submit to the waters of baptism.

The oil is placed on our foreheads and we are,
as the service says,
marked as Christ's own forever.

As we are baptized,
God tells us that our lives—sin and all—are
saturated with his mercy and goodness.

The poet Mary Oliver captures this in a prayer:

“Lord God, mercy is in your hands, pour
me a little. And tenderness, too.”

Pour me a little!

This week as I worked on this message I was
struck immediately by what the word *baptize*
means in the original language of the New
Testament. *Baptize* means literally to immerse.

This is not a soft word, a tame word,
a word for a mere ritual.

To immerse something, to yourself be plunged
into something, that's too dramatic
to be some sleepy custom.

So that meaning, plunge, immerse,
helps us answer not only the question
of why Jesus was baptized,
as we see him thrust into the waters of earthly life,
but also why baptism matters to us.

For God immerses us in the life Jesus
brought for us.

Our baptisms meant something dramatic and life-
changing and life-giving.

And not just for back then, but also for now.

For baptism reminds us that Jesus came not only
to live among us, but to live for us.

To die for us, showering upon us in his self-
sacrificial love, a new reality of mercy.

We need that gift.

We need what baptism bestows.

Because whatever we do, he calls us beloved.
However we stray, he calls us back to live again
and again with God's sustaining life and grace.

As you become more aware of your own sin,
you need not despair,
no, instead, you realize how great and deep and
broad are the waters of God's forgiving grace.

When we feel guilty, we know where to turn.

We rely on God's forgiveness.

Given the reality of sin in the world,
and in our hearts,

we will sometimes falter, and even fail.

There's assurance, though, because today--always,
always in Christ, there is mercy.

In the Episcopal Church,
we baptize infants
more often than we baptize adults.

When we baptize children,
when we welcome children
into the church.

we lay the groundwork
for them to one day choose life.

That's what their parents
intend for them.

That's what their church
intends for them.

By choosing baptism,
Jesus chose to hold fast to God.
And God was pleased.