

First Sunday after the Epiphany—Year B
Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

Christmas has come and gone. In a blink of an eye it passes. For a brief period, the world seems to *stop*, to settle into *peace*; we *breathe beauty* in deep; we *step out of our routines* and *make space for mystery* and *connection with others* and *joy*.

And then, **January 1** rolls around, holidays end, school resumes, work returns, and we're **back to ordinary time**. And even for all that is promised by the **Prince of Peace** and the **Word made flesh**, *the world doesn't seem to have gotten the memo*.

- The war between **Ukraine and Russia** enters another brutal winter.
- The war between **Hamas and Israel** continues to devastate Gaza, even while Israeli Jews grieve and respond to their trauma. And now, this war is threatening to spill out regionally.
- By **January 4th**, **4 mass shootings had already occurred in 2024**, the most recent of which took place at a **high school in Perry, Iowa on Thursday**.
- **2024 election drama** is picking up right where it left off and will only grow worse as the year goes on.

Bleh. It's overwhelming and heavy already.

So, the **church** gives us an **absolute gift**, **right at the beginning of this new calendar year**, because the **very first thing we mark *after Christmas*** on this **First Sunday after the Epiphany** is the **Baptism of our Lord**. *Before we take one more step into this new year and back into ordinary time*, the church wants to help us **get our heads right** and **our hearts oriented**.

The first thing we notice from the **Collect** is that we are **baptized into “his Name”**—we'll have to unpack that. *What all is wrapped up in that Name?* The **Name of Jesus**, yes, *but more than that*. When we are baptized, we are **baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit**. We are **baptized in the name of the Trinity**. We are **baptized into the flow of love that is always giving and receiving and yielding and accepting and flowing**—it's simply how **God IS**—and **in baptism**, we are **caught up in this never-ending flow of love, too**. One of the names Jesus is given at baptism is **“the Beloved.”** *We* are baptized **“Beloveds,”** too.

Our lesson from **Genesis 1** reminds us that whatever else is going on today, **God is all about creating, bringing structure and form, bringing something out of the formless void, bringing light where there was only darkness**. **Baptism**, too, is **creating something, bringing structure and form**, where, *maybe before, there was a sense of chaos or adriftness*. **Baptism brings a shape to our lives** where, *before*, we **might have been piecemealing it**. And that **structure and form and shape** we will *once again* **name and claim** when we **renew our baptismal vows** in a few minutes.

Our passage from **Acts 19** lifts up the **Holy Spirit**. *Baptism had been around for a good while by the time Paul comes on the scene*. **John the baptist**, as in **John the baptizer**, he **baptized with the baptism of repentance**. **Mark 1** describes this, too, today: **John was baptizing with the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**. *People were drawn to this*. We're told: **People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins**.

Confession is good. Giving voice to all the ways we miss the mark is good. Being willing to get a new mind, to enlarge one's mind, is good. Clearing out the blocks and barriers to the flow of love and starting anew is good.

And yet, even John knew there was more to come.

He told them, **"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."**

We're back to that Holy Spirit thing.

Now in those days, Jesus was on the scene, and he also came to be baptized by John in the Jordan. And here's where the world shifts...**"And just 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.'"**

Baptism isn't just about repenting, and confessing, and seeking forgiveness and a new start. It IS about that, but that's only a part of the picture. As we release, as we shed, as we let go and empty out our old identities and patterns and ways, a SPACE opens up, a mansion even, that must be FILLED. In this creative act, God does that and pours this new Name, this new identity into our yearning, longing, spacious souls—"YOU are my Son; YOU are my Daughter; YOU are my Child; YOU are the Beloved, my Beloved; with YOU I am well pleased."

*Before we can do anything in this new year, we have to lay claim firmly to the identity that God pours upon us in baptism and which we celebrate on this day. We have to start **HERE**, or the world will swamp us. And this place that we begin is a fundamentally positive place. This is solid ground, sure and firm beneath our feet, even while the world feels on tilt.*

And filled up with the knowledge that we are God's Beloveds, named and claimed as God's own, we are set free to do the work ahead of us.

In Acts 19, the Ephesians were well acquainted with the repenting/confessing kind of baptism, but once they allowed this belovedness, this well-pleasedness, this inextricable, indissoluble divine family connection *to be poured into them* and Name them anew, the Holy Spirit grabbed ahold of them and started doing things, strange things, wonderful things, so-not-them things—they started speaking in tongues and prophesying.

Okay, when I say **speaking in tongues**, what comes to mind? *(pause)* Most of us picture **gibberish, speech that is unintelligible to our human brains, and people falling out.** And many of us hit just a little bit of arrogance and superiority as we proclaim, *"That is so not Episcopal."*

But let's sit with this a moment. First of all, the Episcopal Church is no stranger to the charismatic movement, and who are we to limit how God chooses to speak to people? Sure, it needs some community guardrails to protect us from personality, ego, individualism, and manipulation, but let's not dismiss it out of hand.

But even more, this one charismatic way of speaking in tongues and prophesying is not necessarily what one finds in the Greek. It's both simpler and more powerful than our stereotypical charismatic image. In the Greek, speaking in tongues means "speaking in the language or dialect used by a particular people distinct from that of other nations."

We're back to Acts 2 and Pentecost when the Holy Spirit set Peter and the eleven's hearts and souls on fire and they began speaking to the multitude, not in their native tongue, *but in the language that those listening could understand.*

And to prophesy is to "utter forth, to declare, something known by divine revelation;" it's to speak into the world what God yearns to have spoken. *Far from individualistic*, there is a collective, seeking-justice-and-the-common-good call in this prophesying.

Now think about all of this in our context.

Firmly rooted in our Beloved-of-God identity, firmly caught up in the flow of divine love, set on fire by the Holy Spirit in heart and mind, soul and spirit, and body, too...

- What would it look like to **speak God's love in word and actions that make sense to others, even if they don't make sense to us?**
- What would it mean to **speak a word of love and justice and care and compassion and belonging to Gazans, or Israeli Jews, or Ukrainians, or Russians and to declare God's love for ALL of these, even if we're not quite sure where we stand in relation to ANY of these?**
- What would it look like to **speak a word that values life, ALL life, into a community that is reeling from gun violence, valuing the lives of those for whom guns make them feel so vulnerable and at risk, valuing the lives of those who believe guns are the only thing that can keep them safe, valuing even the life of the shooter and their family even as our heart breaks for the devastation that one individual, and our society, has wrought?**
- What would it look like to **speak a dynamic, creative word amidst ALL that is so entrenched in our politics, to speak the language of someone whose political views are so unbelievably different from your own, as opposed to winning the political argument at all costs, to speak the word that they understand and so to find common ground that you didn't even know was there?**

Could it be, at the very beginning of this new calendar year, that our baptism could set us free to walk a different way into the coming year?

I don't know, but I am sure am grateful the church gives us this day to pause and remember WHO we are in our core. We are Beloveds, baptized in the Name of flowing Love, baptized in the Name of Jesus who ever shows us what Love made flesh looks like, baptized in the power of the Holy Spirit who is ever creating this world anew. The heavens are torn apart this day *so that YOU* can feel that dove alight on you and know in your core that THIS is your deepest and truest Self. And *from that sacred, holy, tender, fierce SPACE*, let your tongue be set free and prophesy of God's love for all that is. *Then maybe, just maybe, THIS year will be a year of healing for this world that God so loves. Amen.*

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
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