

Year B – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany      “*Baptismal Resolutions*”

How many of you have made New Years’ Resolutions? Anyone care to share theirs? I hope to do more in the arenas of writing, music and art and I’m letting that be open ended. Like you perhaps, I find it difficult to change habits and do things in a new way. Such change is slow and incremental but it happens if we keep our intentions in front of us.

In this morning’s Gospel, Mark makes it clear what God’s intention is for us and the whole creation. It has to do with the arrival of transforming news in our lives – news that is forever Good at its heart. For the writer of the Gospel of Mark, this is the beginning. And, according to Mark, the Good News, the new creation, begins with Jesus’ baptism.

It makes sense to me that the writer of the first Gospel would start here. Although Jesus may have hints that his life was in communion with the Holy One, there must have been an adult awakening in which he began to see more clearly who he was and what he was meant to be. Today’s readings emphasize the Holy Spirit as being the active force that engages the material world in transformation. Our “in the beginning moment”, our new creation, occurs in our baptism. And in the early church this included not only water but the laying on of hands for the coming of the Holy Spirit. It’s a long story as to how the water baptism and the laying on of hands got separated, but until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, it was common for many Christians to be baptized by water as infants and “confirmed” in the Holy Spirit when old enough to speak for themselves. The practice of the early church is that it all happened at one time. And today, in our baptismal rite both elements are included.

It’s hard for us to grasp the understanding of God that Jesus brought with him into the world. Before his coming, and still even today, many people understood God to be “out there” and a Being that needed to be obeyed and appeased in order to be in His favor. And most of us grow up thinking of God that way – as a person who judges and loves and wants the best for us – like a parent who has unruly children. You see that theme running through scripture.

But Christianity is not monotheistic. Christianity is Trinitarian. Jesus revealed the dynamic nature of divine life that has been made manifest in a material world. At his baptism, we see all aspects of the divine at work. Jesus, presumably not needing repentance, steps into the river to be baptized, to immerse himself in the life of humanity. The Spirit broods over him, just as she did at the beginning of this planetary adventure. And words are heard: “You are my son, my beloved one, and I am so pleased!” So, right away, in the beginning, we have the One who stands before us, we have the Spirit brooding, we have the One who speaks. It is this dynamism and infused life that Jesus knew and shared with us – but we forget and easily go back to the old ways of thinking and then, of being. The old ways – God over there and us here.

Our beginning in this immersion into the life of God occurs at our own baptism. But it must be renewed because we forget. I saw a bumper sticker in Bar Harbor once that said “*Born just right the first time*”. It’s a response to the “born again” movement – which brings a sense that we need, like Jesus, an event that wakes us up to the possibility of life that is all around us, through us, and among us every day. We are born right the first time, but we forget who we are and we

need to begin again, to be reborn, as Jesus said to Nicodemus, so that our transformation as the people of God can continue.

We are all are familiar with the power of water as it flows in a river or, even more dramatically, in a stream. We can stand on the bridges in Acadia NP and watch the rushing streams go by, admiring the beauty that surrounds the water and is in it. That's what a lot of us do with our Christian faith. We're meant to jump in and yield ourselves to the power of the living God. That's what baptism is meant to accomplish – for each of us to hear that we are claimed by God, special and beloved and a part of the wonder of God's life here on the planet. Baptism does not make us so – it simply proclaims it for us to know and hear. St. Augustine said it this way: *“In You I have set my good pleasure; that is to say, by You I am doing what is my pleasure.”*<sup>1</sup>

So, like those intrepid folks who plunged into the cold water on Sand Beach on New Years' day, we have the opportunity to start the New Year with a plunge into our baptismal promises which, in a few moments, we will renew again. In part this is our way of jumping back into the river of baptism that we might have climbed out of without even knowing. Or perhaps we've been stuck in one of the side eddies, going nowhere. Or perhaps the stream of life is moving a bit too fast just now and we're being bumped by the rocks and whirlpools that God's life has set in motion. Consider this: What are your Baptismal resolutions for the New Year? What will you do differently? Is there a promise you have neglected? Or one that draws your attention? Put it in front of you. Copy it and look at it each day. Consider some new ways to engage the promise. Make this one of your resolutions for the year. Begin again and be recreated by God.

We are God's beloved ones and at the heart of all that we do as a church is this proclamation.

Henri Nouwen wrote a number of letters to a friend who was struggling with his faith and in one of them he said this:

*Dear Friend, being the Beloved is the origin and the fulfillment of the life of the Spirit. I say this because, as soon as we catch a glimpse of this truth, we are put on a journey in search of the fullness of that truth and we will not rest until we can rest in that truth. From the moment we claim the truth of being the Beloved, we are faced with the call to become who we are. Becoming the Beloved is the great spiritual journey we have to make.”*<sup>2</sup>

And so, we, like Jesus, begin anew. We step into the river of God's life in us and affirm our baptism.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> quoted in Ancient Christian Commentary, New Testament II, Mark, p.16

<sup>2</sup> Life of the Beloved, p. 37

<sup>3</sup> Baptismal Renewal of Vows may be found in the Book of Common Prayer, p.292