

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29:1-6,11; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

“We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through His death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.”

Today on this Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, we celebrate and give thanks for the gift of Baptism, the sacrament of salvation. The sacrament that offers us first, forgiveness of sins, second, incorporation into the Body of Christ, and third - through forgiveness and incorporation into Christ’s Body – the promise of everlasting life.

I love that our first reading on this day comes from the very beginning of Genesis – from the story of creation. There we hear that the Holy Spirit, the “wind from God”, moved over the face of the waters at the very beginning. And through that movement over the water brought all things into being – light and dark, sun and moon, plants, and all the animals of the sea and sky and land.

The story of creation recognizes the truth which our own science confirms, that life on earth originates and finds its source in water. The first animals to appear in the creation story are the creatures of the sea. And in baptism, we discover that God’s offer of eternal life finds its source in water as well, as the Spirit of God encounters us in and through the waters of baptism.

At every baptism, as we will do at the 11:15 service this morning, we call down the Holy Spirit again, to move once more over the waters and bring life. At the beginning the Spirit brought the life of the first creation of the world. And today and at every baptism, we ask the Holy Spirit to make a new creation and offer eternal life to every child or adult who comes to the font seeking God.

In the story of Jesus’ own baptism, the Holy Spirit moves as well. As Jesus rises up out of the water after receiving the baptism of John the Baptist, the heavens are torn apart, the Father speaks, and the Holy Spirit descends in a form something “like a dove” to rest on Jesus.

Where John had offered all people a baptism in water for repentance and forgiveness of sins, Jesus’ own baptism initiates a new type of baptism – a baptism with water and the Holy Spirit, that offers not only cleansing, but renewal as well.

The Letter to the Hebrews describes Jesus as the “pioneer” of our faith. And I find this to be a very helpful way of understanding how baptism “works” – what it does.

Jesus is the “pioneer” or the “trailblazer”. He cuts a new path that we are then able to follow. Jesus’ public life and ministry begins with his baptism in the Jordan River. And we begin our first step into following the footsteps and the path of Jesus’ life by meeting and merging with his story at this point, with a baptism of our own.

Through water and the Holy Spirit, the very “elements” of Jesus’ baptism, we are incorporated into his life, his story, his body. We are united to him, we share in his life, and thus we are able to follow the various points of his life in our own lives.

We, too, are called to follow him in a life of ministry to others. A life of proclaiming the love of God and His offer to all people of eternal life.

We, too, are called at times to suffer, as Jesus himself did. To suffer ridicule, or contempt. To suffer criticism or mockery. Perhaps to suffer physically, as he did.

And, we too are called to die. The promise of eternal life in baptism does not cut out that step that Jesus also took – of death, and burial, and mourning.

But because we are walking on the path that Jesus cut, the trail does not end with death. Against all odds and all mortal understanding, there is a path that continues, that travels through the grave and out another side. Jesus opened up a road to immortality through his resurrection from the dead.

And so we as Christians believe and hope, against all odds and all mortal understanding, that resurrection is the ultimate step in each of our lives, and that a day will come when all members of the Body of Christ live again with the same life we see in the gospel accounts of the living risen Jesus. He will lead us even through this seemingly-impossible route.

This path Jesus has laid for us, we see, has many steps. And baptism is only the first. And so, it is expected that we must continue to grow in the Christian faith and life after baptism. This is most especially true when we baptize infants, who do not yet know what they have received and cannot speak for themselves about their faith in Christ. But it is true for everyone that we all still have a long a way to go as we grow into the knowledge and love of God, following on his path.

And so, it is the responsibility of parents, and godparents, and all the Body of Christ, to help teach all the baptized. Daily – on Sundays and on every day, by word and by example, teaching who God is, what Jesus has done in our lives, and how we should live in response.

All baptised Christians are offered many forms of help along the way. We have an internal mark on our souls, a connection to the Holy Spirit, who will never leave us alone or abandon us.

We have the community of the Body of Christ – the Church – to teach and share the love of God, to encourage us and help us up when we stumble, to support us and love us in times of loneliness or suffering.

We have the physical Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist to nourish us and strengthen us for the challenge and demands of our journey along the path of Christian life. The Eucharist draws us back and reincorporates us into the Body of Christ when we drift. Through it God offers anew the forgiveness of sins, reincorporation into Christ's Body, and life everlasting.

And so today we recommit ourselves to the rigors and demands and joys and hope of the path that follows Jesus. We, who have just celebrated Jesus' birth into the world at Christmas now meet him as he begins his public ministry and we prepare to continue ours, whatever challenges, celebrations, or sufferings may come.

We commit ourselves once more to sticking to this path, following Jesus wherever he may lead us, and calling others to join us on the trail the leads to God, to love, and to eternal life. Amen.