

Year B, The Baptism of Our Lord  
Genesis 1:1-5  
Psalm 29  
Acts 19:1-7  
Mark 4:1-11

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of *our* hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, *our* strength and *our* Redeemer. *Amen.*

Just as Jesus was coming up from the waters of baptism, the Spirit swooped down on him and he heard God say, “My precious child, this makes me so happy!” Mark’s gospel doesn’t start with the story of the sweet baby, the story our own precious children will re-enact [re-enacted] today in our Epiphany Pageant. Mark begins with Isaiah’s prophecy of good news and its fulfillment in the proclamation of John the Baptist, and then goes right into the Baptism of our Lord. After Jesus’ baptism, there was no celebratory reception with good food and congratulatory pats on the back. The Spirit immediately pushed Jesus into the wilderness for forty difficult days. Mark doesn’t use many words to describe those forty days, saying simply “the angels waited on him,” and then takes us right into the story of Jesus’ earthly ministry, teaching us what it means to live as followers of Christ.

Today is one of those days deemed by the church to be particularly appropriate for baptisms, and when there is no baptism, for the renewal of baptismal vows. We do this five times every year, often enough that it can become routine. Unfortunately, its regular repetition makes it easy for us to respond without having to ponder over the words by which we renew our commitment to Jesus Christ. Renew is a word of action. When I typed it into the Thesaurus of my computer, it brought up a long list of words, including: reintroduce; recommence; return to; renovate; repair; restore; replenish. To renew something indicates action based on thoughtful intention. And so it is with thoughtful intention that we are called to answer the questions asked in the renewal of our vows:

Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

These are not idle questions, but questions that seek commitment from us and call us to action. Our responsibility in answering them is only for ourselves. We don’t say “*we* will.” We say “*I* will. As members of the Church, we are very comfortable, perhaps too comfortable, with “we” language. It’s so easy to say, “as Episcopalians, we believe this” or “at St. Francis, we do that.” But the questions we’ll answer today don’t include a single word about the Church, or even about the Body of Christ except to express our belief in it. When we answer those questions and renew our baptismal vows, we are standing out on a limb all by ourselves— except, that is, for God’s help. “I will, with God’s help.”

Yet one of the ways that God helps us is the Church. Last week I told a story about a woman who was asked what she meant when she said she was a Christian. She had a hard time answering because her Christianity was borrowed, based not on her own beliefs, but on someone else’s experience and circumstances. There are more and more people in our country who say they are Christians but don’t go to church. We cannot be effective Christians alone, in isolation, separated from others who profess what we believe. The Church is the place where we learn to live out the

vows of our baptism. The Church teaches us how to treat one another and how to forgive each other when we don't get it right. It gives us a place where we can study and grow in the knowledge of God and experience God's grace, and a safe place to learn how to share our stories so that it will be easier to share them with folks who cross our paths seeking Christ. The Church reminds us that we are all beloved of God, so that we can love and serve others in Christ's name.

That's one of the reasons that the Church no longer sanctions private baptism. We are baptized, in the church, within the Body of Christ and in the presence of the Body of Christ, which not only affirms us, but agrees to support us in our life in Christ. The Church upholds Christ and it holds us up in the process. But that doesn't mean that all we have to do is show up on Sunday, sit in the pew for an hour or so, then go home and forget about it until the next Sunday. As the old saying goes, we'll get out of church whatever we put into it. The Church offers many opportunities for putting ourselves into life in Christ. It's up to us individually to decide precisely how that will happen.

I don't believe it's mere coincidence that on this day when we're renewing our baptismal vows, we will also gather for our Annual Meeting, the occasion when we hear about the state of our parish, elect new leaders, and begin to look forward to the year ahead. There is a distinct connection between discipleship and the work of the church, both inside its walls and in the world it is called to serve. What does it mean for you to say "yes" to God in the renewal your baptismal promises. And how will you do what you promise to do?

Please turn now to the Renewal of Baptismal Vows on page 292 in the Book of Common Prayer, and take a few minutes to reflect on the questions that begin on page 293. As we begin to reflect, let us pray.

O God, you prepared your disciples for the coming of the Spirit through the teaching of your Son Jesus Christ: Make the hearts and minds of your servants ready to receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit, that they may be filled with the strength of his presence; through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
*Amen.*