



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, January 8, 2012

The First Sunday after Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord

***Festal Eucharist
at 11am***

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock

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ON SOME NECESSITIES OF BAPTISM

It was the practice in the early church for those desiring to be baptized to undergo a long catechumenate during which they were very thoroughly instructed in the Christian faith. On this, the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, I offer this short catechism dealing specifically, as they relate to baptism, with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and our being grafted into the church.

Our readings begin with creation and that is a very good place to start: with God afar off in a void, speaking the world and us into existence. God created the world in which we live, all that is in it and surrounds it. He created us and declared it all very good. When God created mankind, he did so in his own image breathing his own breath into our nostrils making us different from all other creatures. He asked three things of us; to be fruitful, to be good stewards of all that he made, and to not get above our station; in other words to be content to be creature and not strive to be creator. In all but multiplication, we failed to do what he asked.

So, God began working to put things back in order and in doing so he began drawing a little nearer to us. He called a nation to be his own chosen people with the intention that they would love him with their hearts and honor him in their lives, and he would so favor them that all the other nations would be inspired to return to relationship with him. And when he had built them into a great nation and they had built him a house, his glory filled that temple and he lived in the midst of his people. But Israel struggled with this calling to be a holy nation and very often sought how to live apart from their God.

Though he had revealed himself in creation, and revealed himself through his mighty and gracious dealings with Israel, man was not persuaded. And so God condescended to reveal himself ever more clearly and personally. He determined to come down here himself, in the flesh and meet us face-to-face. A Welsh poet describes God holding a small globe in his hand. He shows it to his son and they look at this fierce and scorched world. On a hill they spy a bare tree with crossed boughs, the people holding out their arms to it, as though waiting for a vanished April. The Son watches, as through water, and turning to his Father says, Let me go there. (R.S. Thomas, *The Coming*)

And this is how we received him (indicating the cross). The more God revealed himself to us, the more violent we became towards his advances Leave us alone, we said, and in the cross we thought that we had rid ourselves of the righteous but inconvenient man. We were wrong: God would not allow himself to be shut up in dead men's tombs, but revealed himself yet again, this time beyond the grave; beyond the place from which there is supposed to be no

return. We want to live and then die. The resurrection is God saying I am not content that you should. The irony is that the invitation to Holy Baptism is an invitation to your death. It is your death to sin, and your willingness to be reborn into the new and eternal life that God offers you.

So you see, we begin with God far off in a void, he draws near and his fearful presence inhabits a temple. Then he condescends to take on our nature and become man and he lives in our midst. This is Emmanuel, God with us, drawing closer and closer. Do you see the progression? But there is another far more intimate revelation of God left to discover.

When Jesus, himself a baptized person, arose from the water, the Spirit descended upon him. This is the spirit that hovered over the waters at creation, descends upon Jesus, and came to dwell inside you at your baptism (if you are not baptized, any one of the clergy here will help see that you receive this sacrament, don't put this call off another day, we are only too happy to speak to you). The reception of the Spirit is a mysterious gift; any attempt at description will fail to communicate its depth and glory. But here's a homely image. When I drink tea, I don't drink tea, I drink an infusion that is made from tea leaves. It is the opposite with the reception of the holy spirit. We do not receive an infusion of God's qualities; his goodness, mercy, loving-kindness. The reception of the spirit is to swallow the tea bag whole; to ingest the very thing from which all the good qualities proceed. Each of you that is baptized has been indwelt with God himself, so that you don't just have the flavor of God in you, God is in you. And when you wonder by what power you must resist temptations, it is God living in you that is the power, he strengthens you, he advocates for you, he guides you, he empowers you, not from some far off place, but from within your very self.

Baptism is the first sacrament; it is the gate by which we enter the church. It is also the sacrament by which we discern and may partake of all the other sacraments. This is why Holy Communion is reserved for the baptized. It only by God's Spirit dwelling in us that we are able to discern his presence in all other sacraments. Baptism is also the rite of initiation into the church; not the social club that we think the church is, but what the church really is, the mystical body of Christ.

This body is described in the creed as being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The church's oneness is found in our unity and our unity is found in the essentials of the faith. We have freedom in nonessentials but in all things we must have love. It is difficult to be one when my essential is your nonessential or vice versa. That often leads to love falling by the wayside. If we have difficulty with oneness, how can we be holy? The antidote to disunity is to humbly seek the mind of Christ and submit to it. Do that and holiness begins to take root.

To be catholic means to be universal and to be universal means, like it or not, we are open to everyone, not just those who look, speak, behave, vote, earn like us. We accept everyone. But remember holiness? We are called by Christ to become like Christ and we can't become like Christ if we are still conforming our lives to patterns of sin and idolatry. Catholicity without the hope for transformation is cheap.

Being apostolic suggests two things. One, the church is historic. But history belongs to the past, and the church is a living thing with a present and future, so we still need an element of prophecy in the church to guide us. At the same time, those who claim to be prophets and cry for revolution in the church, must submit their vision, thoughts and actions to the apostolic rule that is historically grounded in Christ Jesus. This is the faith once received, not the faith of things made up as we go along.

This body into which we have been incorporated is not an easy one to live in. But we are a people who believe in transformation, redemption, resurrection. We, more than any other people on earth, are a people of hope. Why? Because the body of Christ affords us a measure of assurance of life that nothing else offers. To be grafted into that body through baptism was or will be the beginning of that hope and assurance taking root in you.

Remember Israel. She was never a perfect instrument in God's plan. But she was God's chosen instrument and that made her so much more than she was by herself. So it is today with the church. We are not perfect, but through the power of the Spirit we are certainly able to live beyond the "scandal of appearances" and to glory in the hope that is our calling to be a holy people through our baptism.