Sermon by the Right Reverend John R Stephens

Baptism of the Lord Year C January 9, 2022, St. Andrew's Langley

It is great to be with you here at St. Andrew's this morning. As this pandemic continues to play havoc with our plans, our fears, our priorities, it is great to find opportunities to focus on God walking with us through all that life throws our way. I am so grateful to your vicar, Andrew for his exceptional work here at St. Andrew's but in many other places in the diocese and with the Sorrento Centre. I don't need to tell you, I am sure, that Andrew has many gifts and talents as a priest, a pastor, a teacher, and a leader. I am so grateful for the ministries of your deacons Helen and Lorie both of whom have incredible talents and great abilities in being leaders and living the gospel of Christ. All three of these folks plus the many great lay leaders along with the great things taking place in the parish all paint a picture of a great future to which the Holy Spirit is calling you. It is good to be with you.

I don't know if the same is true for you, but I don't remember my own baptism. I was very young, about a month old. I have seen pictures from the day, but I have no memory of it taking place. In our Anglican tradition this is the same for many of us. But on this day of remembering the Baptism of Jesus, I am struck by how much my own baptism has formed and shaped and guided my life. That cross formed in the water on my forehead and the trinitarian words of *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*, while no longer visible on the outside continue to shape my heart and soul. They affect decisions I make, prayers I offer, actions I take, the direction my life has taken in so many places and times. I am not perfect in how I live all that out but that cross on my forehead has never and will never leave me, ever. It brings me back to the true centre of life, it informs me, invites me, disturbs me, embraces me, names me as beloved. This seems to be important to remember on this day.

For today we remember the day when John the Baptizer handed over his resignation as the one who was to make ready. John had shoved aside all other aspects of life to fulfill his role; the many things that make up the mundane and celebrations of life and fully embraced the fact that God was coming near. God was near. With camel hair and honey stuck in his beard, with prophetic wisdom and insistence he implored people to recognize that God would soon be seen, that God was showing up in the fullness and completeness of a human being but fully divine. A puzzle for our finite minds… but not our infinite faith.

This was the day when it became clear that John was only the preparer, whose job was to make the way straight, not to be the way. People wondered if John was himself the coming Christ. He seemed to have the right credentials, the prophetic wisdom, the voice of one crying in the wilderness the words that many seemed to be craving. But in our gospel reading we heard John the Baptizer's response to the whisperings and the wonderings, "I am not the Messiah, for I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

John has given his entire life to this ministry of preparing for the coming of this one who bridges heaven and earth, who bridges God and our living, who bridges the entire cosmos with the word, the wisdom of God. This one was drawing near.

And the image of Jesus' baptism that we have in the gospel of Luke is that the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove. And a voice was heard "you are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." And ever since then I think these words have echoed throughout this world and the universe. You are my beloved; with you I am well pleased. They were said at our own baptism.

Archbishop Fred Hiltz, the retried Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, carries his certificate of baptism in his prayer book wherever he goes. He recently described that it as old and yellowed. It is a bit frayed around the edges. He said that he must unfold and refold it very carefully lest it tear apart. He wrote this about it: "I treasure this piece of paper, for it reminds me of who I am, to whom I belong, and that my life's labour is 'to take hold of him who first took hold of me' and to live by the principle that 'only as a disciple can I lead, only as a learner can I teach.'" Those words of, you are my beloved have held and guided Archbishop Hiltz ever since that baptismal day.

Recently, around the world there was great sadness at the death of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. His was a voice against racism, discrimination, violence, and injustice. He spoke with great eloquence and yet simplicity about how we might walk in this world. He was a deeply faithful person and his faith guided him to not sit and observe the horrors taking place in his own country, but that he needed to speak about God's hope for our lives and this world. He once said: "We were created by love, for love, and so that we should love. 'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you,' is what God said to Jeremiah. These are words that apply to each of us. We were planned from all eternity. None of us is a mere divine after-thought. None of us is an accident. Before the foundation of the world God chose us to be his children in Jesus Christ…

"There is nothing you can do that will make God love you less. There is nothing that you can do to make God love you more. God's love for you is infinite, perfect, and eternal." (from *An African Prayer Book*). Those baptismal words once more: You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.

In our baptismal liturgy from our *Book of Alternative Services,* baptism is never seen as a one-time event. As a ceremony that is a completion of something. It is a starting place of coming to understand more fully what it means to know that we too are beloved of God. In that liturgy we are called to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to persevere in resisting evil, to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ. We are called to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbour as ourselves. We are to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. We are to strive to safeguard the integrity of God's creation, and respect, sustain and renew the life of the Earth. Our baptism is a calling and not a completion. A calling to live out being a beloved of God.

I have baptized many people over the years. In the name of the Trinity of God I have baptized young babies and children. I have baptized teenagers and adults. I have baptized in hospitals, cathedrals and small rural churches. I have baptized with distilled water, purified water, tap water, even water from the Jordan River. Because of Jesus' baptism and his life, death and resurrection, at each baptism those God-filled, Spirit-filled, invitational words continue to be heard - you are my beloved, with you I am well pleased. May it be so in our words and our actions.