



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens

January 8, 2023, Baptism of the Lord

Episcopal Visit to All Saints, Ladner

I am delighted to be with you here at All Saints this morning. When I was much younger, my family had a small cottage in Point Roberts, and we would often spend much of the summer not far from here. We would often attend worship on a Sunday here at All Saints, so I feel a great connection to the parish. I am grateful for your ministry in Ladner and your presence in the community. I am grateful for the ministry of Robin here in this place and pray for him and for you in this time of transition. I am grateful for the ministry and life of Pat Sallis as we name her to the Order of the Diocese of New Westminster. It is good to be with you.

Last Sunday and the Sunday before were of course filled with all things Christmas and Epiphany. In places all around the world Christians paused on December 25th to celebrate and give thanks for the birth of Jesus Christ. We remembered the central stories related to his birth. The scenes that have become very familiar to us who have been singing about them, reading about them, enacting them, some of us for many years and others just a few. The story of angels, shepherds, a manger, and an inn. The story of the arrival of magi and the offering of rare gifts of frankincense, gold, and myrrh. And the story too about the horrific jealous rage of Herod bent on destroying the Christ child and willing to let no one stand in his way. All of that and much more was packed into the last fourteen days or so and in some ways, it is quite exhausting keeping up with it all. The child Jesus had entered the world.

But... if you are one who knows something about following this Jesus you know that the Christmas story, the epiphany story is not the most central part of the Christian faith. We are

not simply ones who gather to celebrate the birth of Jesus. We gather to remember his life. We come together to be transformed by his life, his teaching, his healing, his parables, his death, his resurrection. We gather aware that God has come into this world to change us, to forgive us, to bless us, to walk with us now and always. We come together to share our faith that we believe that God is known in our midst, with eyes opened by Jesus Christ, in broken bread and in wine poured out. In all of this and so much more we discover that we have this deep ache, this deep desire, this deep sense that we are called to a much higher purpose than simply paying our bills and grumbling about the government. We have come to have faith that the one who calls us beloved invites us to love others as we love ourselves. And we discover this on this day as we remember Jesus' baptism and our own baptism. For in baptism, we acknowledge that our soul needs to know more intently and intensely a relationship with the one who first breathed life into this world.

There are times for me where I am looking for a book to read and am not quite sure what it is that might suit me. So, I might turn to *The New York Times* book reviews, or some such place, to see if there is anything that catches my fancy. Maybe you do this as well. And so recently I came across this book review by Matthew Thomas about the book written by Timothy Egan, *A Pilgrimage to Eternity*. This is how that book review began, see if catches your attention like it did mine: "If you're looking for something to believe in, you could do worse than Timothy Egan's particular blend of intelligence and empathy. In his ninth book, "A Pilgrimage to Eternity," this self-described "lapsed but listening" Irish Catholic makes the 1,200-mile journey from Canterbury to Rome along the Via Francigena "on foot, on two wheels, four wheels, or train" as he attempts to decide what he believes. He writes in the book: "We are spiritual beings. But for many of us, malnutrition of the soul is a plague of modern life."

He is naming a search that he had for himself, but I have a hunch it is a search that all human beings seek to know more about. A search for a calling that goes beyond Christmas celebrations to explore the greatest depths of life.

I have walked a number of pilgrimage routes so far in my life, even walking a very small portion of the route from Canterbury to Rome. And when walking I have met a good number of people. And while most would describe in their own way why they are walking a pilgrimage route like the Camino de Santiago, all on the path seem to be searching for something just like Timothy Egan. Searching for healing, for hope, for peace, for food for the soul. It is this searching that is important for us to consider on this day, for in many ways it speaks of the great human dilemma: to know more about our purpose and our calling. It brought Jesus to the river Jordan and to a specific person there, one John the Baptizer.

There is some controversy about why Jesus would need to come to John the Baptizer for Baptism. Why would the Messiah, the word, the son of God come to seek baptism? Why would he, who would become the bread-breaker, the teller of the parable of the good Samaritan, the forgiver, the giver of the water of life, why would he need to be baptized? Because he was marking the beginning of a journey; a pilgrimage if you will but a journey centred on revealing God amongst us or Emmanuel that continues to call each one of us into a deeper connection

with the holiness of life. A journey that speaks to that very sense of emptiness that too many of us know as we seek greater purpose and meaning.

For Jesus it began with water that was no ordinary water, and a preacher who has no ordinary preacher and the descending of a dove who was no ordinary dove. The fullness of God was seen and known and heard in the simplicity of it all. Just as it was for us.

For our own baptism was very similar to this. We may not remember the day we were baptized but it was the same decision being made. Would we follow God's will, God's hope, God's desire to draw closer? Would we decide to follow this pilgrimage on which Jesus was inviting us? Would we see that the way of the cross would be the way of life? Would we know that same Spirit that descended on Jesus descending on us to lead us and guide us and open us to spiritual heights and action related to the Beatitudes? Would we too know those words that God spoke, "This is my Beloved with whom I am well pleased." Because of our baptism, we are different. We have been marked with a cross on our forehead that never comes off, that guides us and shapes us and holds us each day and each moment.

Richard Rohr writes this: "Baptism, our initiation into the new family of God, is everything all at once symbolized and celebrated. It takes the rest of our lives to understand it, to suffer it, and to make it our own... the reality must be lived first, and only then spoken about. The Christian life is a matter of becoming who we really are."

The adult Jesus stood on the edge of the Jordan River and was eventually beckoned into the river by John. A dove was seen, a voice was heard but most importantly he began what he had come to earth to do: to reveal God with us, God amongst us, God's love, God's blessing... even to the point of death and then resurrection. And we come to this church here today to affirm that we continue to live into all of this. We continue to have that cross originally made in water on our forehead, but a cross that has guided and led us throughout our lifetime. We come today open to God's new call to live into this new life revealed by Jesus. We come today with our own longing for a deeper connection to God and we will soon stretch out our hands to ask that they be filled with bread and wine, bread and wine that will not be enough for a meal but are food for our journey, the journey of discovering more about the God who continues to call us, even us, beloved.

Jan Richardson wrote the poem; *Beloved is Where you Begin* which seems to speak well to all of this:

If you would enter into the wilderness,
Do not begin without a blessing.
Do not leave without hearing who you are: Beloved
Named by the One who travelled this path before you.
Do not go without letting it echo in your ears
And if you find it is hard to let it into your heart, do not despair.
That is what this journey is for.