

Epiphany 2, Year A
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S. Stephen's Episcopal Church
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Today's Gospel from St. John continues the telling of the event of Jesus's baptism begun last week.

Last week John the Baptist in Matthew says "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

This week we have just heard "I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'

If you can bear it, I'd like to revisit the Baptism of Jesus this morning in still, and yet another, or third, way: that is, through the lens of the Eastern Orthodox liturgy. In its celebration of Jesus's Baptism the Orthodox Church makes clear, in distinction from our own, that Jesus's Baptism – and our own -- is not only a cleansing from our private and personal sins, but more significantly, it is the work of God in the salvation of all creation.

In the West, we seem preoccupied with one half of a two part baptism. Both Matthew and John quote the Baptist as talking first about baptism in water for repentance, and then, secondly, about baptism "with fire and the Holy Spirit." The problem is that we tend to latch on to the first – a baptism in water for repentance for sin—and almost wholly forget the second part – baptism with fire and the Holy Spirit. We focus, mostly, on being cleansed from sin, which was meant by John to be a preparation for something much greater, yet to come.

In many Episcopal Churches, if there are no parish candidates to be baptized on the Sunday of the Lord's Baptism (that is, last Sunday), then the entire congregation renews their own Baptismal vows – and that might encourage this sense that Baptism is primarily personal and private. Renewing our baptismal vows comes to mean we pledge to try harder to live up to the calling we have as Christians. But “trying harder,” in my experience, is tiring, and, like trying to keep New Year's Resolutions, depletes us of energy and optimism about ourselves very quickly. The second dimension -- being filled with the Holy Spirit and with fire -- doesn't seem to figure at all into this scenario.

In Orthodoxy, by contrast, the heart of the liturgy for this day is The Blessing of the Great Waters. ***Description of the liturgy.*** *Does that not sound like fun? Here the focus is not so much on the personal and private.* Here, what takes place when Jesus steps into the water of the River Jordan has cosmic, not just private, significance. We are caught up in something far greater than ourselves.

The Orthodox include in their service a reading from Isaiah 35: *Behold, our God renders judgment and will render it. He will come and save us. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall hear. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb will speak clearly. For water shall burst forth in the desert, and a valley in the thirsty land. The waterless desert shall become meadows, and the thirsty land springs of water. There will be the gladness of birds, a habitation of reeds and marshes. A pure way shall be there, and it shall be called a holy way. But the redeemed shall walk in it, and those gathered by the Lord shall return and come to Zion with gladness, and exceeding joy will be on their head, and gladness shall possess them. Pain, sorrow, and sighing fled away.* We are caught up here in the profundity of God's salvation of the world.

The Orthodox commentary at this point reads “By His immersion in the Jordan, Christ sanctified not only the waters of the Jordan, but the whole nature of the waters, as the Church cries out in its hymns: “Christ hath appeared in the Jordan to sanctify the waters” (troparion of the forefeast); “Today the nature of the waters is sanctified” (troparion at the Blessing of the Waters). Since there is water everywhere, by sanctifying the waters, Christ thereby sanctified all of creation and the entire universe.”

What might all this mean for us? One obvious lesson is that preoccupation with self ignores the bigger picture God holds out to us.

One writer says: Early Catholic moral theology taught that there were three major sources of evil: the world, the flesh, and the devil. My moral theology professor always added emphatically: “In that order!” Yet, up to now, most Christians have placed almost all of our attention on the secondary “flesh” level. We have had little education in or recognition of what Paul meant by “the principalities of the world” and even less understanding of what he meant by “the ruler who dominates the very air” (Ephesians 6:12). The world and the devil basically got off scot-free for most of Christian history while individual humans carried the majority of the blame.” An emphasis on the frailty of the flesh deflects us from our larger calling to be ministers of God’s justice and mercy.

In other words, we can become preoccupied with very minor things. “Sin” comes to mean piccadillos: things we have said or done that might not be sins at all. We can come to have a super sensitivity to any act or word that only in our prurient imagination might be titillating -- and thereby something that we can falsely name concretely as sin, because that would give rise to its repudiation, and this would be to us a sign of our own virtue. These mental gymnastics the Church has recognized as a form of pride called “Scrupulosity.”

This is why the Orthodox, cosmic, celebration of Baptism is such a tonic for us in the West. A tonic, because: Understanding Christianity as “Being good,” besides being tiresome, leads to even more confusion. I was presiding at the funeral of a friend last month, and I was surprised to hear that he frequently said “I live life with no regrets.” What might that mean? I think he meant – in a good way, but because of a defective understanding of the faith -- that he refused to wallow in guilt. He refused to have his integrity violated for what some outside authority named as sinful.

For my part, I have lots of regrets – about not being a better spouse, father, priest, you name it. I do have regrets. But as a Christian, I don’t wallow in guilt – although I expect Mrs. Sturni sometimes thinks I don’t wallow in it quite enough – but we confess, ask for grace and move on. Mark Twain said “A person who has a clear conscience has a short memory.” Jesus himself said “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” Goodness is a byproduct of a relationship of faith, not something we can even begin to aim for in itself.

The Blessing of the Great Waters is a tonic because it emphasizes that human beings change when they are swept up into something bigger than ourselves, not by being shamed into guilt, not by focusing only on repentance for our personal sins, but being in touch with a calling that touches and claims our imagination and aspiration. We need not be slaves to self-absorption; we are offered, through Christ’s sacrifice, the delight, energy and joy of Christian community and ministry, which is the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire.

As examples of those caught up in something bigger than themselves, Let us end with a quick look, only briefly, at the two men, Andrew and Peter, at the end of today’s Gospel: John the Baptist said: “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you

looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.”

The scene is awkward: their level of interest in Jesus might only have been idle curiosity: “they followed him.” Jesus feels their presence, and turns around to confront them. He says “What are you looking for?” They are caught and come up with a lame and awkward response: “Where are you staying?”

At this point in their discipleship the brothers lack confidence and are a little –clumsy: they don’t know what to make of Jesus, of John the Baptist, of themselves. But they have the good sense to risk getting started – even if it’s only to ask in a bungling way “Where are you staying?” They sense something good is happening; they are intrigued.

Very graciously, Jesus accepts their effort with love and understanding (and perhaps with humor). He says “Come and see.” He invites them to walk with him and beside him, not behind him.

We also may lack confidence in our discipleship. We bungle about in our own minds wondering how to understand ourselves, how to let go of ourselves in order to enter God’s presence, how to love another person, how to be of use in the world, what to read, what to sacrifice for, who we should get to know, how we should spend our time. But be assured: [Then] the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb will speak clearly. “For water shall burst forth in the desert, and a valley in the thirsty land.”

Jesus invites us, with Andrew and Simon Peter, still thirsting for understanding, into and through the waters of his baptism and our own. He says “I am the living water.” He senses our presence at Mass here and now, inquiring about him. He says “What are you looking for?” He invites us to walk with him, to see where he stays, to approach his Tabernacle and reach out for

Holy Communion, to have supper with him, to be renewed by his Spirit daily, to be caught up in something truly grand. “Come and see.”

In nomine....