

Baptism of Our Lord (B)
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Text: Mark 1:4-11

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At the end of the summer last year, as the growing season was winding down, we harvested some basil we had grown to make pesto. We had quite a production line going. It took over the whole kitchen. Spread out on the counter were heads of garlic and the garlic press, Parmesan cheese, pine nuts, bottles of olive oil and the food processor, and (of course) pots and pots of basil leaves. It was clear that there was some serious work going on. It smelled wonderful, especially the sharp, clean smell of the basil. And all through the fall and winter we've been able to pull containers of pesto out of the freezer to mix with freshly cooked pasta. It's been delicious.

We've been enjoying being able to eat food that we grow so much that this winter I decided to build a couple of raised bed gardens in the side yard. My neighbor helped me salvage some lengths of cedar from his house remodeling project, and a few weeks ago I went to work pulling out the nails and staples, and cutting the wood to the right length. By the time I was done I had a big stack of wood, and there was a carpet of sawdust all over the garage floor. It was a clear sign that there was some serious work going on. And the smell of the cedar was sweet and sharp, and it filled the garage with a beautiful, fragrant smell.

When work is being done, there's usually some sign of it—whether it's the piles of sawdust on the garage floor, or the aroma of food being prepared in the kitchen. You can see it or smell it or feel it—something's going on. Something's happening. This morning, as we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord, I'd like to invite you to think of baptism as a sign of work being done, as a sign that God is up to something—in our lives, in our community, in our world.

It was certainly true for Jesus. As our gospel story tells it, Jesus came to John the Baptist to be baptized. John was an old-style prophet, announcing the coming of God's reign and calling people to repent. But what made people especially interested in John's message was how he told everyone, "God is sending someone to come after me—someone greater and stronger than me, so great in fact that I'm not even worthy to perform the most menial service for him. I've been telling you to repent and be baptized to get ready, because when God sends this One for whom we're waiting, he will plunge you into the Spirit of God!" And when Jesus was baptized, God made it known to Jesus that he was the One John was preparing for. He was God's beloved Son, and the Spirit of God was present in his life in a powerful way. He was the One who would lead people into a new life with God, a life shaped and directed by the Spirit of God. For Jesus, his baptism was a sign that God was at work. And through the rest of the gospel story, we see what sort of work God was up to in Jesus' life—forgiving, healing, reconciling, breaking down barriers, giving hope, making life new.

This morning I'd like to invite you to think about your life, and to think of baptism as a sign of God being at work in you and through you. In the church, we are baptized into this community that is all about Jesus. And what God is up to with us is also all about Jesus. I have a friend who's been through some pretty tough experiences in life. She says that she finds tremendous peace in Jesus' promise of forgiveness, and also in Paul's words from Romans—there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. You see, in baptism, she belongs to Christ. God has claimed her as a beloved daughter, and forgiven all her sins. And the Spirit of God is at work in her life—to give strength and peace, to mend what is broken, to make her spirit whole.

Maybe you saw the article in the newspaper this week about the trip our bishop is taking to Israel, together with all the other bishops of the ELCA. They are meeting with Israelis and Palestinians, political leaders and religious leaders. They are learning about what it's like for the people who live there, and learning how to be advocates for peace. Because in baptism, the bishops belong to Christ, as do the Christians they are meeting with there. And the Spirit of God is at work in them, using their lives, their energy and creativity, for to be a force for peace and understanding, to serve the cause of reconciliation between people.

Week in and week out, as a community we work together to host the Loaves and Fishes lunch program, to teach the faith to our children in Sunday school, to sing praise to God in the choir. And we are sent out from this place to be God's people in the world—to try to be good parents and ethical business people and efficient workers and loving friends and responsible citizens and caretakers of creation. In these and a hundred other ways, you are living out what it means to be baptized into Christ. God is at work in your life to create something that looks like Jesus—in service given to neighbors in need, or witness given to the love of Christ, or an example lived of integrity and truth and compassion.

There are some regular participants in this community who aren't yet baptized, and maybe you're wondering— isn't God at work in your life already? So why be baptized? Yes, God is present and at work already. I know someone who isn't baptized yet, but he says that during a difficult time in life, God has been there to meet him in prayer, to give comfort and care through friends who are people of faith. He's been reading the Bible, and finds Jesus' teaching, especially about possessions, to be very challenging. And he's wondering how to respond to that challenge. It seems clear to me that God is very much present in his life. So why be baptized?

An analogy with marriage can be helpful. There is a difference between living together and being married? It isn't that love exists only in married relationships. But making a public commitment to your partner, declaring that you will share your lives together regardless of what the future may bring—that is a powerful sign that

love is present, love is alive and at work in that relationship. Other people see you differently, and maybe you see yourself differently as well.

Baptism is a bit like that. God's Spirit is present and at work throughout all of creation, and in all of our lives. But baptism is a sign that God's Spirit is at work here, in these people who are claimed by God and who are committed to follow in Jesus' way. Baptism says we are open to God active in this world and active in our lives, and baptism says that God is committed to an ongoing and even eternal relationship with us. Baptism changes the way other people see you. And I hope it changes the way you see yourself as well. Baptism is a sign that our lives don't belong to us, but we belong to God. When we choose to be baptized or affirm our baptism and remember that God has claimed us in love, we are saying that our hearts and minds are open, our whole lives are open to whatever God is up. We are actively receiving the gifts God has for us—gifts of forgiveness and peace, gifts of community and purpose, gifts of hope and strength and joy, so that we can be God's people in the world.

Like the fragrance of basil that permeated the kitchen, or the scent of cedar that fills the workshop, we are surrounded by signs that God is at work. We live and move in God's workshop, this beautiful, complicated world God loves. In fact, we are among the materials God is using to shape the world into a place of beauty and hope and love and peace. Just as Jesus was baptized at a certain place and time for the work that was to be his, so each of us is claimed by God for God's great purposes, greater than anything we can see. We are baptized to share in a work that nobody but us can do, a place that nobody but us can fill, and all of this only with God's help. Thanks be to God. Amen