Matthew 3:1-13
Isaiah 42:1-9

Rev. Julie Yarborough
Christ Church, Summit, NJ

Living out our Baptism

The Sunday after Epiphany is commonly known as *Baptism of the Lord Sunday*. Today in churches all over the world, Christians commemorate the baptism of Jesus and renew their baptismal vows.

Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. John didn't feel worthy to baptize Jesus, but Jesus insisted. And in the midst of his baptism, a mystical moment occurred: The heavens were opened to him and he saw God's spirit descending like a dove, which alighted on him and a voice cried out. "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

This blessing bestowed on Jesus at his baptism echoes the words from Isaiah that we heard Salia read earlier today, of the servant to come whom God says is "my chosen, in whom my soul delights." Early Christians hearing the story of Jesus' baptism would have recognized the reference.

The same voice that speaks to Jesus in his baptism speaks to each of us in our baptisms - we are God's beloved, in whom God is well

pleased. When you are baptized into the body of Christ, there is no one or no-thing that can take that away from you.

At Christ Church, and in the United Church of Christ and the American Baptist Churches, the two denominations with which Christ Church is affiliated, baptism is one of two sacraments - the other being communion. “Baptism is the sacrament by which a person is initiated into the Church and into its faith, life and hope.”[1]

I grew up at Glendale Baptist Church in Nashville, TN, where “believer’s baptism” was the practice, and I was baptized at the age of 12. Believer’s baptism simply means that the person being baptized reaches an age where they can make choose for themselves to commit their life to Jesus and to the church. It’s an “outward sign of an inward decision.” For me, the choice to become baptized wasn’t anything new. It felt natural, having always grown up in the church and feeling very much a part of the congregation. I was disappointed that I didn’t have some sort of mystical experience in the moment of being dunked under water, symbolizing a death to the old life and the start of something new.

At Christ Church, baptism can happen at any age. If infants are baptized, the parents make promised on the child’s behalf. They pledge to

[1] Getting Ready for Baptism, Open Waters Publishing, United Church of Christ, 2014, p.7

raise them in the church and teach them about Jesus. You as a congregation also make promises to help nurture the child on their spiritual journey, offering love and support along the way. Sometimes teens are baptized at Christ Church - often in the course of confirmation, if they weren't baptized earlier, but sometimes in a regular worship service. It's a choice they make for themselves. Adults might also decide to be baptized, if they have never gone through the sacrament as an infant or teen. Regardless of your age… "Baptism is not the end; its really a beginning. It marks the beginning of your life as part of the church, and the beginning of your life as a student and follower of Jesus.[2]

If you have never been baptized and would like to explore what that means for you, please let me know.

Last Sunday, a group of young adults (and a few not-so-young adults) traveled to Washington, DC for a service-learning trip about Faith and Politics. We learned about churches who have started social service agencies to minister with those on the margins and how the UCC works for social justice and change at the systemic level. We heard from Christians - both clergy and lay people - whose faith calls them to act in the world to care for the downtrodden and marginalized because they

[2] Anthony B. Robinson, in Getting Ready for Baptism, Open Waters Publishing, United Church of Christ, 2014, P. 37

understand that's what it means to follow Jesus. This synthesis of faith and action is what it means to live out our baptismal vows in the world.

On our first full day in DC, we took a walking tour of Adams Morgan, a neighborhood where the Church of the Saviour has operated since 1946. Started by the Rev. Gordon Cosby, who heard a call to form a church, which would take seriously the teachings of Jesus. Now an ecumenical Christian community, with 8 worshiping congregations, their ministry focuses on an inward/outward journey, balancing inward contemplation and personal piety with outward action in the world through mission groups. The various mission groups focus on issues of poverty and racial justice, living in community with the impoverished and disenfranchised people of Washington, DC. Many of their missions - including over 30 public health clinics, a hospice, affordable housing, employment services, a coffee house and a building providing work space for other non-profits - have become 501(c)3 non-profit organizations scattered throughout the DC area.

On our walking tour, we met Mary Jordan, a faithful member of the Church of the Saviour for the past 41 years, who has lived and worked at Christ House, a respite facility for impoverished people who have no safe place to recover from serious illnesses or surgeries. Now in her 70's, Mary serves as the Chief Nursing officer at Christ House, along with her

husband, who is a Nurse Practitioner. She spoke to us of the difficulties and the joys of living out her faith in a very concrete way on a daily basis. That day, she was going to have to tell a resident that he could no longer stay at Christ House because his unwillingness to be treated for his bi-polar diagnosis, and his angry outbursts, made it unsafe for the other residents. Each day brings unexpected challenges, but Mary relies on her faith to help her stay grounded.

On Tuesday, we spent the morning with Seabury Resources for the Aging, a non-profit that was started over 100 years ago because folks from two denominations - the UCC and the Episcopal Church - saw the need to care for the aging population in their churches. We divided into two groups and raked leaves for senior citizens who have been able to stay in their homes because of support from Seabury.

After a few hours at the Smithsonian Museum of African American History, where we spent an intense afternoon immersing ourselves in the history of racism and black resilience in the United States, we met for dinner with some of the Christ Church diaspora who live in Washington, DC. Madison Tatum, Brice Facey, Matthew Markay and Vanessa Sousa met us at Mi Vida, a Mexican restaurant where the 14 of us sat at one long table. As we waited for our food to be served, we acknowledged that January 6 was the 5th anniversary of the insurrection at the US capitol as

well as the Epiphany. I passed around the star words (that we gave out in worship last Sunday) so each person could take one and then I read aloud these words from Howard Thurman:

The Work of Christmas

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

We then read this prayer together: “Gracious God, bless each of us as we do the work of building community together. Amen.”

Our last day in DC was spent with the UCC Office of Public Policy on Capitol Hill. We learned that there are lots of lobbyists for large corporations in DC who have large budgets, but the only voices for the

poor and underprivileged are various faith and non-profit advocacy groups. The UCC and other groups like them speak up for those who have no voice.

The staff in the UCC office of Public Policy are guided by the resolutions passed by the National Synod, which meets every 3 years and is made up of delegates from each of the UCC conferences across the country. They work with interfaith partners to follow what's happening on the hill and speak out about those issues. Mike Neuroth, the director of the UCC office in DC, explained that the work they do is comparable to seeing people caught in the current of a fast-moving river - they pull people out of the current, but they also go upstream to see what's pushing people into the river and work to stop that from happening.

After a brief training and discussion to prepare us for our visits with congressional staff, Rushad Thomas, Director for Domestic Policy at the UCC, took us to meet with staff members from Sen. Booker's and Sen. Kim's offices. We spoke with them about our concerns regarding immigration, student visas, detention centers in NJ and ICE raids. Three of our young adults told stories about their personal experiences.

We were scheduled to meet with Sen. Chris Coons, but he had a death in his family and had to fly to Omaha for the funeral. Although he

was unavailable, his staff graciously offered to take us on a private tour of the Capitol. As we stood in his office, waiting for our tour, the TV was on and we saw the news of the killing of Renee Good by an ICE officer in MN.

We are living in disheartening, scary times. It was a bit surreal waking around the Capitol almost 5 years to the day of the insurrection and being only steps away from national leaders who are working hard to undermine our democracy and take away our freedoms. Several times we saw fully armed National Guard troops patrolling streets and metro stations.

Discouragement, fear and the erosion of human rights were nothing new to the people of Israel who were in exile in the time of the prophets. They were taken from their homeland by the Babylonians, who were later conquered by the Persian Empire (539 BCE) In the passage from Isaiah that we heard earlier, a servant is promised to the people, a servant described as “my chosen, in whom my soul delights,” who will “bring forth justice to the nations.” God has given “a covenant, a light to the people. To open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

Some Christians identify the servant mentioned here in Isaiah as Jesus, but this promise was made centuries before Jesus appeared on earth. It’s unclear to whom this passage describing a salvific servant

points, but similar words describing Jesus, and spoken by Jesus himself in the Gospels, are reminiscent of this passage. It's important to note that this promise that God makes isn't for salvation as a heavenly reward, but a tangible promise of justice to the nations of the earth.

In discouraging times, it's more important than ever to remember our baptism - to touch the water as to remind us *who* we are and *whose* we are.

The Reverend Donna Shaeper tells a story about her brother, who called her up one day to see if she still had his infant baptismal gown. "Why do you want it?" she asked. "Your kids are all grown and so are mine."

"I want it near me," he said. "I want to remember that I was presented to God and God took me in."

"But why now?" she asked.

"Because," he answered her, "Life has become very hard for me."

“Aha.” She writes, “Life becomes too hard for many of us, many times. Every Christmas we realize that we not only have to rely on a child for salvation, but we also have to rely on our own childhood…..

It is also never too late to remember our baptism as a touchstone of all of God’s promises. In baptism we have been presented to God. And God accepted the present of us.”[3]

All your days, remember and trust this: [You]have been baptized. [You] have been claimed and named, called and gifted, in the waters of baptism. You belong now and forever to Christ and his people. Take joy in this gift and live boldly.[4] Amen.

[3] IBID, p. 33.

[4] IBID, p.38.