

**The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller**  
**Year A, First Sunday after the Epiphany, 8 January 2017**  
**Matthew 3.13-17**  
**Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA**

At the end of our seminary education and training, those of us hoping to be ordained deacon or priest are required to take Ordination Exams. When I took these exams, they were just in the process being standardized by the national church, and some dioceses still had their own exams and some of us, me included, were forced to take two sets of exams. The diocesan exams, in particular, occasioned much stress and many sleepless nights, since some who had trained for three years, and spent a great deal of time and money in the process, were sometimes denied ordination on what seemed to be fairly arbitrary grounds. Sometime, if you catch me in the right mood, I'll tell you about my diocesan exams...I almost washed out when, during my oral defense, I discussed the creeds as historical documents and the retiring bishop said very firmly, "The creeds are just given. They're not up for discussion!"

In any case, I still remember one of the questions on the standardized exam. It was a good question, actually. It asked us what feast of the liturgical year is more important, Christmas or Easter, and why? Now, if someone had asked me this question before seminary, I would have had no trouble in answering with Christmas—after all, we couldn't have an Easter if Jesus hadn't first been born (incarnated, as the creeds would later call it) and, besides, Christmas seems way more fun—just ask any child. But alas, I would have been wrong, and fortunately by the time I took the exam I knew the correct answer is Easter. In the church liturgical calendar, Easter comes first and everything else is interpreted in light of

it, and this should give us a strong clue about how to interpret everything we do on Sundays throughout the year. Keep this mind today as we move from Christmas into the season after the Epiphany, and explore the meaning of baptism.

On January 6<sup>th</sup>, the Epiphany, Eastern Churches celebrate the birth of Jesus. Western Churches, however, mark this feast day with the appearing or manifestation of Jesus as the Messiah and son of God, not only for the Jewish people but also for Gentiles. In Matthew's Gospel, this world-embracing vision is marked by the intriguing, if tragic, story of the magi from the East, who see these events foretold in the rising a mysterious new star. Their journey to Bethlehem, with that fateful stop to consult with Herod, triggers the slaughter of male infants in Bethlehem and the flight of Jesus with his family to Egypt. With this story, Matthew is recapitulating the story of Israel's Exodus in the person of their new King and Messiah, Jesus, and he is strongly suggesting that the corrupt Jewish monarchy, then under Rome's control, should be viewed as the new Egypt and Herod as the Pharaoh. No greater insult could be laid at the feet of a Jewish ruler.

Today, the First Sunday after the Epiphany, we have moved forward in the story. Jesus, who has returned with his family and grew up in Nazareth, is now a young man who has been formed both by his family's Jewish faith and, particularly, by the ministry of John the Baptist. He is now ready to start his own public ministry, and to strike out in a somewhat different direction than John did, but first he accepts John's baptism. We've already had occasion to discuss Jesus' baptism in recent weeks. There are strong hints in the Gospels that the early church struggled to understand why Jesus was baptized by John, since his baptism

was clearly a baptism of repentance and seemed also to mark Jesus' submission to John's leadership. Matthew resolves these problems, first, by having John try to dissuade Jesus from being baptized by him and, second, by seeing it as Jesus' formal anointing by God's Spirit as the Messiah and Son of God. The word, "Beloved," here is not so much a term of affection—though it is this, as well—as it is a word that designates Jesus' status in relation to God. His baptism is also, of course, a continuation of Matthew's larger story of Jesus' Exodus from Egypt, again representing in his person as king and Messiah the Jewish people's migration out of the desert and into the Promised Land. The symbolism here is deep and rich.

Now, as important as Jesus' baptism was for his life and ministry, we must also note that it does not mean quite the same thing as our baptism does. As we saw, with his baptism Jesus was in some sense reaffirming a previously-established connection to his own Jewish faith and tradition. He does this just before he begins his own public ministry, a ministry that would continue but also diverge from certain aspects of his Jewish background in important ways—this may be the significance of his enigmatic statement to John that his own baptism "is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (3.15). However, while Jesus was *reaffirming* his connection to his faith with this baptism, when we're baptized that connection is *established*. The sacrament of baptism, done with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, actually makes us Christians. As the *Book of Common Prayer* tells us, baptism is full initiation as members into the Church, also understood as the body of Christ. And it is here where the earlier mention of Easter becomes relevant.

In baptism, we are sacramentally buried and raised with Jesus, the Messiah. Ritually, we die with Jesus on the cross and we experience his resurrection into our own, new resurrected life that he made possible in *his* death and resurrection. We thus, like Jesus, act out the founding story of our Christian faith in baptism just as he acted out his founding story as a Jew in his baptism. But our founding story is different, and it is through Jesus that we, as Christians, are connected to the larger story of Jesus and the Jewish people, a story that truly does embrace the whole of humanity and, indeed, the whole of creation.

When people today struggle with whether to become—or, if they were raised in the church, to remain—Christian, they typically spend a lot of energy asking themselves about traditional Christian beliefs. I know some of us in this church struggle every Sunday with the Nicene Creed—and that’s good, I think, since there is much in the creed with which to struggle. But I’d like to suggest that our baptism into the death, and resurrection of Jesus is less about beliefs and more about giving ourselves to this larger story. Being a Christian is about linking our lives—in all kinds of ways—to the life of Jesus and, through him, to God and God’s purposes for humanity and the creation. The question we should be asking ourselves is not, what can we believe, but rather, can we find ourselves in this story? If we can, the beliefs will take care of themselves.

The Baptismal Covenant, which we will say together in just a few moments, summarizes that larger story for us in stark and minimalist terms, and then asks us to recommit to the original promises that we made or that were made for us when we were first baptized. This covenant gives us a sense of what it means for us to join ourselves to the story of Jesus: We continue in worship of God, we

resist evil, we proclaim by word and example the Good News, we serve Christ in serving others, and we strive for justice and peace, and we respect the dignity of every human being. These are simple, but they are not easy. We will need help, and this realization pushes us forward from Easter to Pentecost, but as usual I'm rushing ahead in the story.

For now, I want us to take away how Easter is always, and in all ways, central to our founding story and how our baptism is giving ourselves to the story of Easter. Everything else in our faith flows from this—in the Gospels, in the liturgical year, and, hopefully, in us as individuals and as a community of faith. We join in baptism with the story Jesus for our own sake, for the sake of the world, and to fulfill God's purposes for us and creation. Amen.