

C Baptism of Our Lord 1.12.25  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22  
Focus Statement: God sees you.

I've caught snippets this week of the pomp and circumstance surrounding the funeral processions for President Jimmy Carter. My favorite moment was the prayer by Senate Chaplain Barry Black who, after thanking God "for giving us the gift of someone with the ethical congruence to be salt and light to his generation," he went on to remark about Carter, "he made the world more palatable." And I laughed out loud because, palatable? If I hear something described as palatable, I don't think, "man, I want to rush out and eat that." I think, "this is edible." Describing Carter as someone who "made the world more palatable," I don't know, it felt like a low bar to clear.

But, once I got over being amused by the Senate Chaplain's word choice, I was struck by the familiarity of the words being spoken. On Thursday morning I watched as the casket containing the body of the former president was carried, step by precise step, up the stairs of the Washington National Cathedral, draped in the American flag, and surrounded by members of the US Honor Guard, where it was met by the Most Reverend Sean Rowe—as a total aside, the Episcopalians have the best titles, the most reverend, come on. But anyway, the Most Reverend Sean Rowe, Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church, greeted the casket with the same words he has certainly said at countless funerals over his twenty-four years of ordained ministry, words I have said at countless funerals over my ten, "With faith in Jesus Christ we receive the body of our brother, James, for burial." And at the end of the funeral, after several hours of speeches by dignitaries of every type, from religious leaders to political leaders, to a duet of Imagine by Garth Brooks and Trisha

Yearwood, the clergy present again gathered around to place their hands on the casket, as Reverend Rowe said words I have said enough times that I can say them without reading them, “Into your hands, O God, we commend your servant James, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive him into the arms of your mercy, and into the glorious company of the saints of light.” In sharp contrast to the pomp and circumstance of the events of the day, the military precision, the gathered dignitaries, the formality, and grandeur, and shows of power, I was reminded in those words that this was still, like every funeral I’ve ever attended or presided over, the commending of a man into the arms of his maker.

The words and the service possibly struck me even more poignantly this week because we’re celebrating Baptism of Our Lord Sunday today, and if you’ve been to a funeral I’ve conducted you’ve heard me say, in our tradition, and in the Episcopal tradition, the funeral liturgy is the completion of the baptismal liturgy. In the funeral liturgy we are declaring that the promises made in a person’s baptism, promises that we are united with God through Christ’s death and resurrection, that we are adopted as God’s own children, heirs of the promise, those promises hold even more firmly. So this morning, as we contemplate the baptism of Jesus, it’s worth looking at what are these promises that hold us through our entire lives and beyond.

Our reading for this morning may have sounded a bit *deja vu*, because we read it less than a month ago when we were reading about John the Baptist. Remember how back in Advent we heard about how “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

And “he went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” And then he called people vipers fleeing from the wrath to come. And yet, somehow, despite the viper thing, “the people were filled with expectation in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,” until he assured them that, “the one more powerful than I is coming” one who will baptize not with water for repentance, but “with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Today we get to see what it meant for Jesus to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire, and, because of Jesus, what it means for us.

John’s baptism, the text makes clear, is “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” That’s why people were flocking to John in the Jordan, because “if the one more powerful than [John was] coming,” they wanted to make sure they were cleaned up and ready. And baptism was not something John invented either. There was a lot of baptism, a lot of ritual washing in the ancient world. This is not unique to John or, eventually, to Christianity. But Jesus’ baptism is something different. Jesus’ baptism wasn’t a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” because he was Jesus, he didn’t have need for repentance or forgiveness of sins. In fact, it’s fitting that we are combining Epiphany and Baptism of Our Lord Sunday this morning because Jesus’ baptism was just that, an epiphany, a revelation of Jesus’ identity, of who he was, God’s Son, the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

Jesus’ baptism makes clear what we already knew to be true, because it had been pronounced by the Angel Gabriel to Elizabeth and Mary, had been proclaimed by angels to shepherds in a field, sung by Simeon and Anna. The Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus in

bodily form like a dove is confirmation of what had been promised, that this man is the Son of God.

And because Jesus' baptism is different, then ours too, baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are also different. This is why we baptize infants in our tradition, because baptism is not about repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism is about confirming what God has already done through Jesus, made us into the very children of God.

A lot of times in scripture you is the plural you, you all. The Apostle Paul especially was big on plural you. The verses that talk about bearing challenges, those are plural you, as in God will never give the community of believers more than they can bear. There is nothing the community of believers cannot handle. I point that out here because the you in this text is the singular you. You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well-pleased.

Dear people of God, through Jesus' death and resurrection, we are baptized into the promise of God's love for us. A baptism which doesn't bring about God's love, rather it confirms what is already true, what has been true since before the beginning, that we are God's beloved children. Baptism reveals what God has already done, claiming us as God's own. A claim that will remain true throughout our whole lives, until the day when we too are declared a sheep of God's own flock, a lamb of God's own fold, a sinner of God's own redeeming. We are God's beloved no matter who we are. The promises made to James Earl Carter Jr., 39th President of the United States of America, would have been true if he'd spent

his whole life as Jimmy the peanut farmer. They are as true for you and I, even though those words are not likely to be spoken by the Most Right anyone. Nik and Levi were baptized by the Bishop, but the fancy hat makes the words no more true for them than they were for any of us. In baptism God declares what God has already made true. That you, you, singular you, you are God's beloved. And with you, with you, God is well pleased. Thanks be to God. Amen.