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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
1st Sunday after Epiphany: The Baptism of our Lord/Year B
January 7, 2018
Text: Mark 1: 4-11

On the way in this morning I noticed a few houses still lit up in celebration of the Twelve Days of Christmas and of course, remnants of the season that still remain here. I don't know about you but I am not yet as ready to leave the wonderment of Christmas and all that comes with it. Don't get me wrong. There are some things that are well past their welcome like the constant advertisements to buy, buy, buy and the bad renditions of Christmas music piped throughout every store and mall. And then there were those unexpected moments that remind us that we are not in control no matter the season-the news of a beloved parishioner's death and the call from our wonderful Senior Warden to tell me of a busted water main pipe as I laid in my sick bed downed by a monster head cold. No, I am speaking of holding on to the spirit of Christmas and hearing the melodious sounds of choirs singing carols and hymns and joining in the choruses. Of further imaging what it must have been like under the stars in Bethlehem and being with the magi who brought gifts to the Holy Family.

But the time for lingering at the stable has passed and the lectionary calls us to focus. As one writer put it, "The Star may continue to shine" but the story has moved on. And today, on this first Sunday after the Epiphany, Mark's gospel situates us at a place that we already visited only a few short weeks ago-the banks of the Jordan River.

It is here that we are reacquainted with the eccentric prophet, John the Baptizer, who proclaimed a baptism for the repentance of sins. And it is along the muddy banks that we see Jesus, an adult Jesus, come forward to begin his public ministry as he is baptized by his cousin John.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The heavens tore apart and a voice was heard from on high. And so it began.

Jesus' trip to the waters of the river and his submergence in it and his breaking forth from the waters was really not about forgiveness of sins. He had no need for a baptism of repentance. Whatever he had known about himself beforehand, he went down into the spirit-filled water as Jesus Bar Joseph, and emerged with a voice thunderously proclaiming him as the Beloved Son of God. Leaving behind his life as a carpenter, Jesus found himself in the wilderness for a time of reflection. And he had the voice of God still echoing the words at his baptism: "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*" And with that he came back as a preacher, a healer, a teacher, the Messiah.

Today we are reminded not only of Jesus' baptism but of our own baptisms as well. There was probably no mud or sand wedged between our toes, no full submersion down into churned waters or a voice that boomed from the heavens but the water we received in baptism is the sign that began new life for each of us.

Baptism, our catechism tells us, is the sacrament by which we are adopted as God's beloved sons and daughters and made members of Christ's Body, God's Beloved Community, and inheritors of the kingdom of God.

As Christians we celebrate the fact that we too were baptized with power and the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that moved over the deep at the beginning of creation and the same Spirit that descended on Jesus like a dove. Our receiving of this life giving sacrament isn't simply an insurance policy for salvation but a commitment to a whole new life-style, radically different from that of the world. This doesn't mean that we are above anyone else—we are not greater than anyone—not even the least. But it means that we are marked as Christ's own to continue the work of Jesus in the world. It means that we are to be bearers of the Good News of Jesus Christ. To teach others about God and God's love. To be healers in this world so in need of healing. To be about changing the things we can change with God's help. To invite others to be members of God's Beloved Community. Doing these things and more without hesitation or fear, knowing that we too are God's beloved.

I suppose in doing these things the spirit of Christmas really does continue.

Howard Thurman's poem entitled "The Work of Christmas says it all best:

*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 brothers (and sisters),
To make music in the heart.*

And as we go about doing them, hear that same voice speak as it did so long ago and throughout generations: *You are my son. You are my daughter. You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased. I am with you. I love you.*

Stand with me now and let us renew our vows together. Let us re-commit ourselves to continue what was started in Christ Jesus our Savior.