

EPIPHANY I
BAPTISM OF OUR LORD
ST. CHRISTOPHER'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
JANUARY 11, 2015

And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water of John's baptism, a voice came from heaven,
"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

My clergy friend and colleague has a daughter who is a junior at Ole Miss.

Last year she was "presented" at one of the Mardi Gras balls in Montgomery – of which there are a surprising number.

Parents were invited to attend the final practice prior to the event, and so my friend was there in the drafty auditorium as the young women were instructed on where to stand, and how to curtsy to the King and Queen, while their escorts were warned of dire consequences if they showed up drunk.

As all were about to depart to prepare for the night's festivities, the Master of Ceremonies – an old friendly acquaintance of mine from our Montgomery years – sent them off with these heartfelt words of wisdom.

"Young ladies," he said, "we are all excited about yo' comin' out this evenin'.

Never forget that, next to yo' weddin' day, enterin' into Montgomery society is the second most important day of yo' life!"

Now I know that gentleman well enough to know that he was entirely serious.

And the truly sad part is that aside from my priest friend, no one – deb, escort or parent – laughed or even raised an eyebrow, he told me.

Most in that gathering fully agreed.

First, that a woman's wedding day is the most important day of her life.

(That is a subject for another sermon.)

And that being a part of Montgomery society was the next most important thing in the whole world.

Now you also need to understand that almost all of the debutants and their families were at least church-connected Christians,

And that the MC, who held that opinion, had served on the vestry and, more than once, been Sr. Warden of historic St. John's Episcopal Church-

My home parish, where I was baptized at age 30 on Easter Eve, 1974.

He may even have been in attendance that night.

Today we – the Church universal - remember the Baptism of Jesus.

His cousin John reluctantly agreed to baptize him along with everyone else, knowing that it should have been the other way around.

Not that Jesus needed to have his sins washed away.

And not just for show.

But because in the waters of baptism, his life began anew.

It is immediately after his baptism and the ensuing temptations, that the public ministry of Jesus begins.

Baptism is the second most important day and event in Jesus' life,

Even more important than his birth, which we so extravagantly celebrate.

As we just read, the Holy Spirit descends upon him and remains with him,

And he hears the voice of God saying to him,

"You are my Son.

I love you.
I am pleased with you.”

And in the power of that Spirit, and with the loving affirmation of his Father ringing in his ears,
Jesus embarks on the three-year adventure that results in our salvation, and the eventual redemption and restoration of God’s entire creation.

In the waters of baptism, new life begins for each of us –
Whether we are baptized as infant or adult.
Our sins are washed away,
Though more will follow.
But now we have been adopted as daughters and sons of God,
And so have a continuing relationship through the Christ, that allows us to return to our Father again and again,
and start anew with sins forgiven.
We are given the gift of the Holy Spirit, to guide and strengthen us.
And as sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus,
We become heirs – heirs who inherit the Kingdom of God.
The same words that were said at the baptism of Jesus,
God says at our own, whether you or anyone else hears them or not.
“You are my Son,
You are my Daughter.
I love you.
I am pleased with you.”
And with our hair still wet, and those words ringing in our spiritual ears,
A new life begins for each of us, if we choose to enter into it.
And that brings us to today.
That “if we choose to enter into it” part.

The Baptism of our Lord is appropriately one of the great baptismal days of the Church.
We have no one to be baptized today at St. Christopher’s.
But we have an opportunity to together re-affirm our Baptismal Vows.
And I will invite you to do just that in a few moments as the conclusion of this homily.
To once, or once again, or once and for all
Intentionally enter into our Baptismal Covenant,
The covenant that we or those who loved us entered into on your behalf.
We are invited to enter into the new life that we are promised.
Into all the mystery and heartache and joy that go along with it.
To ask God to help us keep the promises and vows that we make.
To be with us on the adventures of our ministries.
To bring us at last to our journey’s glorious end.

You will notice some St. Christopher’s T-shirts here today.
They bear on them the words, “I will.”
That is the response to the questions we are asked as part of our Baptismal Covenant.
The people who are wearing them are Sunday School teachers who have entered into that new life as a result of their ministries and who are engaged in their holy ministry.
We need more teachers. We always need more teachers.

Will you answer, "I will," if you are asked? Will you volunteer?
Or if that is not the ministry to which you are called,
will you be searching and receptive to where our Lord is calling you?
Will you enter in?

In just a few moments I will have the pleasure of commissioning and blessing your Vestry for 2015.
These people, through you, have been called, and have entered into their baptismal ministry, and they too will
respond, "I will."

Like them, you and I are called and called daily,
And we can choose to respond "I will," or we can turn away.
God will honor our decisions.
But God will never cease asking, inviting, until the times and the ministries are right.

At his baptism, Jesus certainly answered, "I will," thank God,
On that **second** most important day of his life.
And it took him, not to a Mardi Gras ball, but to the Cross –
And to the **most** important day of his life,
To the most important day in the life of the World.
His "I will," took Jesus to Easter.
Our "I will," will do the same.

Please turn now to page 302 in the BCP, stand and respond to the questions.
Then the Covenant questions, beginning at the bottom of page 304.
Then the prayer at the top of page 306.