

Epiphany Episcopal Church
January 13, 2019
Baptism

Good morning. It is a beautiful, snow-scattered day. A good day for a baptism, as in the readings featuring Jesus and John. A day when parents, at the 10:30 service, would have – were it not for the snow – brought their children to be anointed. There is a story of a young boy, about the age of 3, who has a newborn baby sister. A few days after his little sister arrived home, the little boy finds a way to climb into her crib. He nestles beside her and whispers, ever so softly, “Tell me, baby sister, tell me what heaven is like. I forget.”

I love this story because it reminds me of who we really are, of where we began, and where we are going. Each of us has come from heaven, from God who is father, mother and Creator. Human life, from birth to death, is the work of this Creator. See the face of a newborn, hear the laughter of a toddler, feel the exuberance of childhood, listen to the hope of youth, experience the love of family and friendship. Human life is the work of a Creator of extraordinary imagination. We are the children of this Creator. Biologists speak about evolutionary theory, the origins of *homo sapiens*, apes and chimpanzees as common ancestors. Scientists opine on the origin of the universe 14 billion years ago, and of life on earth itself. The astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson suggests that life actually began on Mars and later seeded the earth. Yet we know – we know as that little boy in the story and in a way that we cannot explain – that we come from God. Individual souls and selves, we are unique and miraculous. At birth, we begin a journey – a journey from God, with God, and to God. On this journey, there is more that connects us than divides us.

How many of us here have had your DNA tested through Ancestry.com or other services? I did recently. My father's name is Aloysius Stanley; his father, my grandfather, spoke Polish, not English. My mother's maiden name is Corcoran; her mother's maiden name is Finnegan. I figured half-Irish, half Polish. Here is what I got: 49% Ireland and Scotland, 25% Eastern European and Russian, and 26% a mix bag. The part of me that is Russian is a little alarming; to be sure, in the DNA testing, there was no collusion.

Our DNA composition, of itself and in my view, is insignificant. It is what it is. What is significant is the connection we have with one another. A connection over time: of families – parents, grandparents, great grandparents. A connection over distance – from Eastern Europe to Ireland to America. Our collective and genetic DNA is a common thread of humanity that connects us. The reading from Isaiah speaks to this connection: “I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you.” A Eucharistic Canon in the Roman Church parallels Isaiah's words: “Lord,” it begins, “You are holy indeed, the fountain of all holiness. From age to age you gather a people to yourself so that from east to west a perfect offering may be made to the glory of Your Name.” From age to age – the lineage of our DNA, back hundreds if not thousands of years ago. From east to west – across lands and oceans. There is more that connects us than divides us.

The central story in the Gospel today – baptism – is a story written in the lives of every or nearly every person in the pews today. Baptized Christians, we are here. But why? Why did this happen? Why did your parents choose to have you baptized? Why did the parents of the children who would have been baptized today choose baptism for them? It is tempting to say that baptism is a cultural rite of passage, not a religious ritual. The explanation is too easy.

Thousands of years ago Jesus stood in the river that flows between Israel and Jordan and received John's baptism. Today, worlds and ages apart, the rite of baptism continues. How can this be?

The poet Percy Bysshe Shelley writes:

. . . some unseen Power
Floats, though unseen, among us; visiting
This various world with as inconstant wing
As summer winds that creep from flower to flower.
It visits with inconstant glance
Each human heart and countenance;

An unseen Power floats, though unseen, among us. This unseen Power is the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit with which Jesus baptizes, the Holy Spirit the apostles in Samaria waited to receive. The Holy Spirit visits "with inconstant glance/each human heart and countenance." It visited the hearts of our parents who brought us to the baptismal font. It visits the hearts of parents today. Baptism is a sacrament: an outward visible sign of an inward spiritual grace. Yet the outward, visible sign is not what happens on the altar. It is what has happened already: our presence here through the unseen power of the Holy Spirit who guides us.

There is more that connects us than divides us. Our journey from God, with God, to God; our common thread of humanity, from age to age and east to west; and the unseen Holy Spirit who floats, though unseen, among us, visiting with inconstant glance each human heart and countenance.

Amen.