

**Sermon for the First Sunday after The Epiphany**  
**The Baptism of Our Lord**  
**RCL Lectionary, Year C**  
[Isaiah 43:1-7](#) / [Psalms 29](#) / [Acts 8:14-17](#) / [Luke 3:15-17, 21-22](#)  
**January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010**  
**The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour**  
**Mill Valley, California**

**Baptismal Uncertainty**  
**by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer**

I'm always fascinated – terrified, at times – that this Sunday of the church year, the Sunday we remember not only Jesus' baptism, but our own – lends itself least of all Sundays to preaching. Maybe that's perfectly appropriate, because we can't really dig any deeper in our tradition than the gospel we hear today. Here we are at the root of roots, the very basis of who we are: a baptismal community, birthed in Spirit and fire, anointed anew; in the vivid language of some of our sisters and brothers, born again into new life that springs up within us and reaches out beyond us with the power of the living God.

Even Luke, who enjoys the richness of detailed narrative, treats Jesus' baptism with only a handful of words. What more can be said about it really? The power of Christ's and our shared baptism is not something we are ultimately in control of. We can only tell story about it, sit in awe of it, reflect on it, act on it. But to talk about the rush of the Spirit in our hearts and its unpredictable ways is like trying to catch the wind. Not one of us really expected to end up today where or who we are. Not one of us is sure what even tomorrow will bring. But the extraordinary thing about our baptism is that all of our todays and tomorrows (and even our yesterdays) are no longer in our hands anyway. They now are in God's. And that is both comforting. . .and terrifying. To paraphrase one common summation of the gospel: our baptism indeed comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

The promise of baptism is like God's promise to Israel emerging from exile in today's reading from Isaiah: the world is upside down. The powerful peoples will be undermined, and the least, the weakest, and the scattered receive divine favor and restoration to wholeness in ways they can scarcely imagine. Nothing is as it should be or is as they or we expect. Likewise in our story of the early church from the Book of Acts, the apostles discover to their amazement that the gospel has found footing with the Samaritans, the pariahs of their day. Somehow the world will no longer be defined by the boundaries between Jew, Samaritan, and Gentile, and that means nothing will ever be the same again. What will the world look like? No one is certain.

So how are you living into your baptism these days? For so many of us it seems in these most uncertain times, it is the simple recognition that we are not in control over our own lives that is the first step in allowing the divine to take command through our baptism.

Where God will lead us next is entirely unknown.

This past Friday at our monthly "Church of Our Saviour Lunch Downtown," I had the privilege of conversing with some of our members who keep their thumbs on the pulse of the present economic and political situation in our

country. They have to. It's part of their job. So we talked politics – maybe a little dangerous for a group of strong-minded Episcopalians to do, but nonetheless, we did. And I don't mean the partisan kind or the rancorous sound bite slinging we see too often in the media. I mean the meaty sort about policy, ethics, and morality; about what's possible, about what works, about the complexity of the difficult situation in which we find ourselves as a country and a world. We reflected how easy it is these days to bury our heads in the sand of our individual interests and pretend that what affects our neighbor doesn't affect us. We turned over the raw truth that shines a light on one of the greatest and most dangerous of American myths: that I am in control of my own destiny.

We watch our elected leaders and our bureaucracies these days flounder in the face of not really knowing quite what's going to happen next. And a handful of violent extremists in a world of over six billion smell the fear in the water and are wickedly exploiting our uncertainty just to be noticed. How happily we seem to oblige them! Perhaps our economic woes, our insistent rhetoric about a "war on terror", and the spiraling debt of our nation are all symptoms of our collective attempts to control the uncontrollable. No one on Friday around the table had a magic bullet to fix anything, whether it was healthcare or national security or our shared debt as a State and nation, though together I have no doubt there was over a century of accumulated work experience, study, and education in the room. We could agree on one truth that seems unassailable: that we are living in an era of profound societal change. But none of us knows what's really going to happen next, even the best informed among us.

But for the community of the baptized, that sense of always looking into the unknown, no matter how well prepared we might be, is not simply uncomfortable, it's expected. It comes with the territory.

When Jesus stepped into the Jordan River, I find it hard to believe he knew what was going to happen, either. He was at last responding as an adult to God's call, setting aside all control and predictability in his world, letting go as we all must sooner or later, recognizing that his life was not his own. There's a powerful sense, in this earliest strand of our shared Christian tradition that the Jesus who comes out of the Jordan is not the same Jesus who went into it. Whatever human ambitions and blood ties that held him to his home in Nazareth, whatever life of certainty that awaited taking up his father's trade is gone, washed away in the swirling waters. He has now been anointed by the Spirit and called beloved by God. The Incarnation has now grown up, the predictions and oracles of his birth have reached their full adulthood. The fulfillment of what has been prophesied is about to unfold. The "hopes and fears of all the years" are about to bear fruit. And humanity will never be as it was.

And so, because of this singular act, we look in the mirror at ourselves as Christians and no longer see simple flesh and blood but God-touched and God-directed lives. We no longer see ourselves as towering, rugged, individuals. Instead, we see ourselves fundamentally in relationship not only with those we know, but with the unknown – with the stranger, with the wayward, with those we'd never thought we'd befriend. And we see ourselves in relationship with a God in Christ who defines *unpredictability*, who transcends our fears, and defies even our wildest imaginings. That's what we celebrate this day. How odd we are! And how blessed as we break bread together yet again and sing praises as an anointed community, born anew. For God's grace has touched us and we are no longer our own, and what and who we will become has yet to be revealed. But we know, in the face of all our uncertainties about the future, that we are loved; we are beloved of God; and perhaps that is all that really matters in the end.