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## *And Jesus Also*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener**  
**The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord**

*... The people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts ...*

My family and I woke up this past New Year's Day in New Orleans, a city I have loved since I was a little girl and one that I was thrilled to be able to show my own children. We'd had a great time taking in all the sights, eating all the food, hearing all the music. We were getting ready that morning to head to Mississippi to visit old friends, and we were full of anticipation of more good times to come. We were getting ready to head to Mississippi, when my husband came rushing in with the announcement that something terrible had happened in the French Quarter. Suddenly, all our expectations for the day became infused with hard, scary questions: Could we make it out of the city? Was it safe to be on the streets? Were others we knew and loved in town all right? And at the heart of everything, of course, how could such an unspeakable thing have happened?

This is the way life is, sometimes. Oftentimes, actually. Whether it's the start of a new year or the start of a new job, the start of a new relationship or the start of a brand new little person, we bring so many expectations, so many hopes, to life's beginnings. We do this knowing full well that being human can be astonishingly difficult and that every life contains its share of heartache and tragedy and trouble. And so a part of us holds our breath even as we hold onto our dreams. We hope while we also question. What will this little one's life become? Will she be happy, secure, accepted? Will he know that he is loved? Is this the right path to take? Am I making the best decision? Will everything turn out okay in the end? Who will save me if I fall? These are the natural wonderings of the human heart.

They are also, it turns out, the wonderings of this morning's gospel lesson. "As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah . . ." This is the way Luke begins the familiar story of Jesus' baptism. You can just feel the longing here, can't you—the yearning that comes with the dawn of a new day. The hope, but also the anxiety. After all these years, all these generations of waiting and watching and praying, the people sense that Messiah may finally have arrived in the person of John the Baptist. Then, it's as if John pulls out this gigantic straight pin and bursts their bubble. I am not the Messiah, he says.

But this is not where the story ends. John the Baptist goes on to tell the people that while he himself is not the Messiah, *One who is more powerful is coming . . . [and] he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand . . . to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*

It's easy to get caught up in this rather dramatic, perplexing language, yet, to me, the part of today's gospel that stands out most are two simple words that occur in the very next sentence. Two words: *Jesus also. Jesus also.* "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also was baptized . . ."

"Jesus also" being baptized has actually provoked a certain amount of controversy through the centuries. Even today, a simple Google search will turn up all sorts of questions like, *Why was Jesus baptized if he was sinless? Why was Jesus baptized if he was Jewish? Was Jesus baptized Catholic?* (No, in case you were wondering). This is all well and good and can make for a fun theological exercise—though don't trust what you read about it on Wikipedia—this is all well and good and can make for a fun theological exercise. Yet what really strikes me about Jesus' baptism is the same thing that strikes me about virtually every other experience of Jesus' life we read about in the gospels; namely, that Jesus does what he does in solidarity with us. Jesus

does what he does to go through all that we go through, including those experiences that make us feel like we're drowning but that end up, weirdly enough, giving us new life. Jesus is baptized to become one with us. He submits himself to this act of "repentance" (from the Greek word *metanoia*, literally meaning, "to turn around")—Jesus submits himself to this act of turning around to that he can be a friend to all of us who find ourselves turned, often topsy-turvy, by the changes and chances of this life. Jesus is baptized to be a friend to all of us living in a world where things so often not only don't go quite how we had expected but frequently veer radically, painfully, even tragically, off course.

- A world where a surprise diagnosis means that a spouse's life or a child's life, or perhaps our own life, is suddenly very different than what we had imagined it would be.
- A world where the loss of a dream forces us to reevaluate everything we thought we knew about ourselves.
- A world where the realization that "having it all" has left us feeling empty and bereft.

Friends, baptism is the sacrament through which you and I are assured that we are not alone in our strange, often perilous and twisted world. We are not alone on this winding journey called life, where we must turn around, again and again and again, facing head on those things for which we had not planned and needing to find another way home. In each of our turnings, each of wonderings, *How on earth could this have happened?*—in each of our turnings, especially the ones that are the most painful, the most shocking, the most humiliating—in each of our turnings, there is Jesus also.

And so we see pictures on the news of Californians driving, even running, for their lives amidst raging wildfires . . . and Jesus also. We see migrants making treacherous journeys across rivers in the night to escape political and economic oppression . . . and Jesus also. We see teenagers dying by overdose and suicide in increasingly high numbers in some of our nation's most privileged communities . . . and Jesus also.

We see people of faith, and people of no faith at all, tenderly caring for those in need, making sandwiches for the hungry, visiting those who are sick . . . and Jesus also. We see a congregation promising to support those who take on the awesome task of parenting and mentoring children . . . and Jesus also. And we see Oluwanifemi and Mason and Robert and Evelyn and Julian and Abigail and Carter and Jackson and Harlow and Sophie and Anna Louise and Vanessa—all sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism . . . and Jesus also. Which is great Good News! Amen.