
Of Ruin and Redemption

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The First Sunday after the Epiphany – Year A**

Well, did you hear about the little boy who threw a tantrum after his younger brother's baptism? The boy and his mother were walking home from the service when the child started crying. He cried harder and harder and his mother kept asking him what was wrong, but he wouldn't say. Only later did he break down and confess: "Mom, that preacher who baptized Jimmy said he wants us to grow up in a good Christian home, but I want to stay with you and Dad!"

Today is the day in the church year when we remember the baptism of Jesus. The Bible doesn't tell us whether anyone went away crying, but one thing's for sure: Christ's baptism was a disruptive event. According to this morning's reading from the Gospel of Matthew, it caused the very heavens to be opened. Mark's version of the story puts it even more graphically, describing the heavens as being "torn apart." Then "the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove." Jesus' baptism was a disruptive event. Because of it, things that had been closed and stuck, yielded and moved. The heavens split open and the Holy Spirit came down. But that was nothing compared to what happened next.

Our lectionary—the list of assigned scripture passages we read from in our worship services—our lectionary has an unfortunate way of cutting stories off just when they've getting good, and today's gospel is no exception. It closes on a high note, with God telling Jesus right after his baptism, "[You are] my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." But this is not really where the story ends. Do you remember what happens next? Matthew chapter 4, verse 1: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Do you see what's happening here? Jesus is baptized and affirmed, he is pronounced God's beloved son—but then he is called out into a wild, dangerous, barren place to face pain, hunger, and temptation.

Jesus' baptism is not the end of the story, but, rather, the beginning. It is the starting point of an adventure—an adventure that will be filled with both comfort and risk, joy and sorrow, victory and defeat. An adventure that will take Jesus far away from his hometown and family of origin as he crosses borders to build a family of outcasts and sinners. An adventure that will contain great miracles and inspiring teachings and a triumphal entry, yes, but also a betrayal and a trial and an execution at the hands of the state.

This adventure will grow to encompass not only Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist, but also the twelve apostles and countless lesser-known disciples. It will grow to include people like Ambrose of Milan, who was baptized and then made a priest and finally a bishop all on the same day (How's that for a disruption?). It will include people like Francis of Assisi who decided to sell the lucrative family business then give all the proceeds to the poor. It will include people like Rosa Parks, who refused to stay in her assigned seat. It will include people like Martin of Tours, Martin Luther, and Martin Luther King. It will include inner city school teachers who stay late every afternoon working with children on whom others have given up. It will include parishioners who pack lunches for individuals whom society has apparently decided don't deserve to eat. It will include people who sacrifice their precious free time to become trained to help prevent suicide and the young woman who leaves work early on Fridays not to get a head start on the weekend but to drive her elderly neighbor to chemotherapy. It will include the member of your Bible study who texts on the same day each month for two years after your divorce just to say she is thinking of you. It will include the young professional who volunteers to be a Big Brother and so eats breakfast every Saturday at the crack of dawn with a boy whose father died before he was born.

The adventure will grow. It will grow and it will grow and it will grow . . . until eventually it will grow to include you

and me, if we let it. I say if we let it, because, truth be told, I don't always want my life disrupted or inconvenienced. Especially now. Things feel chaotic and confused enough as it is. I don't have to tell you what a difficult week we've just come through—a difficult week on the heels of an incredibly difficult year.

You know, there is an ancient teaching that claims that whenever a lot of disruptive things happen all at once, this is to distract us so that we don't get in the way of something lovely that is trying to be born. It's a nice reframing, this idea—one that can create space for hope in the midst of dark and desperate times.

The Christian conviction, of course, is that something lovely has already been born. This is what we celebrated several weeks ago at Christmas. Something lovely has already been born. Our calling now—yours and mine—our calling is to help make that loveliness manifest in a world full of violence, cynicism, fear, and distrust. Which means not hiding, not avoiding, not becoming jaded, and not giving up, even, and especially, when things seem at their worst.

This is the spirit of baptism—both Jesus' and ours. A spirit to risk being rattled, disturbed, even ripped wide open, for the sake of love. A spirit to will and to persevere in the face of danger and darkness. A spirit like that of the apostle Paul when he wrote to the church at Corinth: "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." Or, as Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, puts it: *We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized; we're not sure what to do, but God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down but we haven't broken.*

Friends, the love of Christ urges us on, even now—especially now. So do not be afraid. Do not give in to despair. Lean in to the places and people it would be easier to avoid. Wade in the waters that hold both tumult and transformation. Look for redemption in the ruin and the rubble, for it is there that you will meet the Christ Child. It is there that your own child or grandchild or godchild will come to know joy and wonder and to discover what it is that really matters in life. It is there that you yourself will find renewed meaning and purpose. It is there, as the dust settles, that you, too, will hear a voice proclaiming, "You are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." Amen.