

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia  
8 January 2012**

*Baptism of Our Lord: Gen 1:1-5; Ps 29;  
Acts 19:1-7; Mk 1:4-11*

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Just as the newly baptized Jesus comes out of the water of the river Jordan, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. He sees light streaming through the parted sky, and hears a voice that says, “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

In Mark’s gospel, the earliest gospel written, only Jesus sees and hears these things. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark describes this scene as Jesus’ personal experience; we don’t know whether the people around Jesus are witnesses to the great light from the sky, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the voice from heaven.

In the opening verses of Genesis, there are likewise no eyewitnesses. After all—human beings have not yet been created. All is darkness, and so there is nothing to be seen anyway. Now our current translation says that “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters,” but those of us who remember our King James Bible will remember that there it says, “And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” And we remember that in Hebrew and in Greek, the word for “spirit” and the word for “breath” or “wind” is the same word.

In this, the first creation story in Genesis, the voice of God also speaks: “Let there be light.” And with the spoken word of God, there is light and it is separated from the darkness; there is Day and there is Night. With the spoken word of God, time begins, history begins, the life of the world begins.

On that day by the Jordan, as human history had already stretched on for thousands of years, God declares from the heavens the relationship between God and God’s beloved Son. God announces the gift that God has given into human life. God speaks into being the fact of God’s self entering into human time, into human history. On that day by the Jordan, it is as if creation has begun anew. With God’s self come to abide among us, it is as if we have all been given another chance to live into God’s created world in the ways that God intended—in peace, in harmony, with generosity, with compassion, with love.

With Jesus coming into the world—announced in Mark’s gospel not by birth stories but by his baptism—the life of the world was renewed. And with each new baptism that we witness, our life as a church is renewed. Each new baptized person that we welcome reminds us that the core purpose of our life together as a church is to replenish and renew human life. Each time we experience the presence of the Holy Spirit descending upon the life of the newly baptized, we are re-energized to commit ourselves anew to the church’s life and work. We welcome a new member, yes, and we recommit to our own membership in this sacred institution.

As the credit card slogan tells us, membership has its privileges. But membership in God’s one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church also has its commitments, its responsibilities. We are not here to function as a nice polite social club. We are not here to assert our special status apart from the rest of humanity, apart from the rest of God’s created world, apart from the rest of human history.

Instead we are here to engage the world as beloved children of God. We are here to engage the world in the ways that Christ taught us to engage the world. We are here to welcome the Holy Spirit into our daily lives, to allow the Holy Spirit to work through us so that the brokenness of the world can be healed. We are here to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to act as the body of Christ in the world, so that human time and human history can be turned toward the light; so that human time, human history, and human life can be redeemed to move forward towards the kingdom of God.

We are baptized into the Holy Spirit so that we can experience the deeply transforming power that comes with the faith that God is alive and active in the world we live in. As we renew our faith and trust in Jesus Christ who came among us, we re-awaken our moral and spiritual imaginations to envision the world Jesus described. When we act to fulfill the responsibilities that our baptism places on us, we act in the ways that Jesus Christ taught us. We work for wholeness and reconciliation; we work for justice and compassion, just as Jesus taught us. When we act as a church energized by the power of the Holy Spirit, our own human spirits and our own human bodies achieve wonders of transformation large and small—wonders of human healing, wonders of human flourishing, wonders of human enlightenment.

We do all this before a cloud of witnesses that have gone before us, a cloud of witnesses that have given life to the church for generations. And we do all this also before a crowd of skeptical witnesses in the world around us, witnesses who wonder why we bother, who cannot figure out why we have not given up, who ask why we continue to seek the light, who snicker when we persist in striving for the kingdom of God.

And we persist anyway. We persist not because of the strength of our character, not because we are such superior human beings, but we persist because for whatever reason it strikes us that having faith is better than not having faith. We persist because we are empowered by the grace and the Spirit and the glory of God. “In the temple of the Lord all are crying ‘Glory!’”

As we celebrate the day of the Lord’s baptism, as we reflect on the significance of our own baptism, and as we welcome the newly baptized into our church, let us also say, “Glory!” “Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.”

