

Epiphany 1B
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In a year or so, the national church is going to release for use in congregations, a new selection of services for use in public worship. The book will be called **Changes: Prayers and Services Honoring Rites of Passage**. No one will be required to use any of the services, but they will be available for those of us who wish to explore. It will offer us the elements of rites from diverse cultures and religious traditions that recognize and celebrate transitions and transformational events in our lives, as well as circumstances or events that offer and effect change. While the liturgies may differ, there are certain key elements in each of them like: naming the transition and how it affects the person and the whole community; proclaiming a history (including loss and grief), growing up and letting go, gratitude, and the need for courage, healing and imagination. It will also offer proclamations of hope in discovering a new call and the willingness to discern what that might be.

Today we are celebrating a rite of passage: the baptism of three generations of a family into the family of God. And today is the perfect Sunday for this event as we hear about Jesus' baptism by John. There is certain act of humility in the receiving of a name. The name is chosen for us either from family names or from names that engender meaning to our parents. Accepting a name suggests a death in a way; a death to the old and the creation of a new identity. For Jesus, that new identity was as Messiah. For us, we become beloved children of God. We are never truly ready for the transitions or rites of passage in our lives. As any parent will tell you, young adults chomp at the bit to gain a bit of independence but it takes a while for them to feel fully competent if ever at all. For those of us on the other side of the table, we have a plan for aging oh so gracefully. We say we are going to do it right...tomorrow we shall begin to make the necessary arrangements and plans and then suddenly too many tomorrows have passed and we are not prepared for the transition that must occur. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit guides us through these transitions in God's time, not our own!

The message of our Gospel today is hinted at in the reading from Genesis. God creates the earth from a void and chaos where water, wind, and fire come together. Each of these elements has the power to both create and destroy but God uses them for good. God uses these to effect and signify a transition; a transformational event.

This is the same thing that occurs when we are baptized. The Spirit moves through the symbols of water, fire, and the community or "earth," calling us by the name chosen for us, and we become children of the creator and fulfill the Kingdom of God. We are called into a vocation; the vocation of Christian life and we must be willing to accept the name signifying our vocation and new life.

When a child is baptized, the child's parents and sponsors choose the name and accept the vocation for that child until the time when the child is able to accept it for themselves. Think about that for a second. As adults, when our children were baptized, we accepted FOR THEM the vocation of Christian Life. We promised to raise them in a Christian home and to teach them about Jesus, about his teachings and what we can do that will be pleasing to God. I have often heard people say that they do not want to force their children into a faith...that they want them to be able to choose. Well, frankly folks, and I hope I don't offend anyone here, but that is a load of hooey! How can anyone, let alone a child, choose if they know nothing? If a child was given the choice say...to go to school or to stay home, and they had never been to school...what do you think they would choose? Would your child choose to try out for a soccer team if they had never seen or played soccer? It is really a rather flimsy argument...and what it really says is...when you get right down to it...is well...what it really says is that the parents did not understand what they were promising in baptism, or do not care enough about the spiritual health of their child to provide them with the experiences and the knowledge to make their own decision when they are older. I think very often that parents think that baptism will somehow create a protective bubble around their child; that their child will never be hurt or have to make really difficult decisions. If baptism didn't protect Jesus from pain, shame, humiliation and death, I think that should tell us something about what we are expecting from baptizing our children!

When we are older, we must be willing to accept our vocation of living a Christian life with our whole heart. Jesus was named by his parents, and in his family's religious tradition, he was presented at the temple for circumcision. His earthly family raised him to know their religious traditions, explained their theology to him and taught him their moral code. As a young adult it came time for Jesus to accept his role as Messiah and begin to model for us what he would become in time when the heavens would be torn apart –ripping the social fabric that separated rich from poor and the strict adherence to law that divided God's kingdom rather than uniting it. By accepting his name and his vocation, Jesus brought into focus the true Kingdom of God, The kingdom of the beloved. His role was not that of “super hero” but in a sense, he was given a super power in baptism... to be both human and divine.

From that point on, it was up to Jesus to live into his transformed identity. This is what our journey into baptized life is like. Baptism is our glimpse into the Kingdom of God right here and right now. We frequently reaffirm our relationship with God and each another, but at times it is quite easy to get lost and think that somehow we don't measure up. We sometimes feel like we must go away from who we really are in an attempt to fulfill our call to be people of God. Once in a while we lose sight of what is right in front of us and we focus our energy elsewhere, and we are left feeling empty. We struggle with the idea that we need only be who we are to please God and to be welcomed into the kingdom. I have a little illustration for you.

(show a \$100 bill...crisp and new)...who wants this.....(ball it up).....who wants it.....(spit on and ground into the floor)...still want it?? Well, we are like this dollar bill. Many times in our lives, we are dropped, crumpled, and ground into the dirt by the decisions we make and the circumstances that come our way. We feel as though we are worthless. But no matter what has happened or what will happen, we will never lose our value in the eyes of God. Dirty or clean, crumpled or finely creased, you are still priceless to those who LOVE you. The worth of our lives is not found in what we do or who we know, but by WHO WE ARE.

So to Trish, Samantha and Elijah I want to remind you that you are special. Don't ever forget that. From this day forward you are part of a community...a circle of love and care that will be with you and for you forever. To those of us who have already stepped into our vocations as Christians and are now reaffirming our vows, let this serve as a reminder: Count your blessings, not your problems...we are God's beloved. We will never be left behind, punished for eternity or counted as worthless in the eyes of God.

In baptism we are given access to a power that has been with us since the beginning of human existence. We are given the power to change the future. To change what is to what can be. This is our super power! Having been given this power, we must daily look for the dove and listen to the voice of God saying...."Beloved, in you I am well pleased".