

CALL TO WORSHIP:

*Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water,
he saw heaven being torn open,
and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.*

And a voice came from heaven:

*“You are my Son, whom I love;
with you I am well pleased.”*

(Mark 1.10-11)

Let us worship God.

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

God of power and love:

We come into your presence to worship you because you first reached out to us in Jesus Christ, to give us, your creatures, the opportunity to become your children.

We confess, however, that we do not deserve your loving intentions. We keep wanting to go our own ways, and those ways invariably lead away from you. We claim to be your people, but fail at putting your values into practice in our lives. We live in a sinful society, and we participate in its sin more than we challenge its sin.

We realize and acknowledge, then, that we are sinners; and we ask you to forgive us, through the sacrifice of Jesus, our Savior.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, renew us also, so that we may not simply return to sinful ways, but become more and more like you in the way we think and act. May our time of worship, then, steer us in the right direction; and may the Holy Spirit strengthen us to continue in that direction.

We pray in Jesus' name; and we pray together, now, as he taught us:

Our Father, which art in heaven:

Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done in earth,

as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil;

for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,

for ever. Amen.

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation —
the old has gone; the new has come!
All this is from God,
who reconciled us to himself through Christ,
not counting our sins against us.*

(2 Corinthians 5.17-19)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,
let us be assured that God will forgive us.

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **Old Testament Reading:** Genesis 1.1-5 - The first day of Creation

This reading is the beginning of the first account of Creation. In it, God creates light, his first act in creating the universe.

- **Psalm:** Psalm 29 - “Ascribe to the LORD, you heavenly beings ...”

Psalm 29 is a psalm of praise.

It sees the thunderstorm as a sign of God’s great power.

Notice how the writer keeps repeating the phrase “the voice of the LORD”. Presumably, he’s referring to the thunder itself, which he considers to be the powerful voice of God.

The words “the voice of the LORD” tie in with today’s Old Testament reading, in which God creates light by giving a command; and also with today’s Gospel reading, in which God’s voice is heard at Jesus’ baptism.

- **New Testament Reading:** Acts 19.1-7 - Paul baptizes disciples in Ephesus

This passage is a story from Paul’s third mission journey. In it, Paul administers baptism to a group of people in the city of Ephesus.

Notice the connection that this story makes between baptism and the giving of the Holy Spirit.

- **Gospel Reading:** Mark 1.4-11 - The baptism of Jesus

This is Mark’s account of the baptism of Jesus.

Since that account is so brief, the reading begins with Mark’s account of the ministry of John the Baptist, which we read on the second Sunday of Advent, also.

SERMON: “Initiation”

My Grade 9 high school yearbook contains not just one, but two photographs of me on Initiation Day that year. We Grade 9 students were instructed to dress up that day; and at lunch, we were required to eat our lunch sitting on the floor in the center of the cafeteria, rather than sitting at tables like everyone else. So there I am in those two photos, sitting on the floor along

with other Grade 9 students, wearing one of my father's old hats, and shoes that didn't match, with my homeroom class number ("Blue 2") written on my forehead in lipstick, eating my lunch.

Initiation was the process by which we Grade 9 students were "welcomed" to the school by the students in the older grades. I guess the idea was that it was some kind of endurance test, in which we were subjected to a bit of humiliation, in order to prove our worthiness, and be fully accepted as members of the student body.

Fortunately, as initiations go, ours wasn't very severe. The thing I found the most difficult about the whole experience was getting to school and back home again in my Initiation Day getup. We didn't have a high school in my hometown of Hespeler in those days, so we had to be bussed from Hespeler to one of the three high schools in the neighboring city of Galt. The school busses picked us up downtown, which meant that I had to walk a good mile from my house on the outskirts of town to the place where the busses picked us up. So I walked that mile downtown in the morning, and back home again in the afternoon, looking ridiculous in the clothes that we had been instructed to wear.

Although I took the initiation in good humor, I have never agreed with the whole principle of the thing. In the rest of my high school years, then, I never participated in initiations on the other side — that is, in being one of the persons doing the "initiating". In fact, I think the whole practice had fallen by the wayside by the time I got to Grade 12 or 13 (yes, we had Grade 13 in those days, for students who were planning to go on to university). Of course, initiations can get out of hand. I'm sure we've all heard horror stories over the years of initiations in which people were badly traumatized, or even seriously injured; in which the older students, or team members, went too far in subjecting the newbies to whatever endurance test they had dreamed up.

Well, it so happens that we have an initiation ritual in the church as well, through which we receive people as new members. Unlike other initiations, though, initiation into the church is not meant to be a test of endurance, nor to be embarrassing or humiliating. Our initiation ritual in the church is called the Sacrament of Baptism. In fact, in theological jargon, baptism is sometimes referred to as "Christian Initiation".

We undergo and administer the Sacrament of Baptism for two reasons. The obvious one is that Jesus instructed us to do so. In the concluding paragraph of the Gospel of Matthew, the risen Jesus says to his disciples, *Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you* (Matthew 28.19-20). In other words, we undergo baptism in *obedience* to Jesus.

The less obvious reason is that Jesus himself was baptized — the story that is told in today's Gospel reading. That is, we undergo baptism also in *imitation* of Jesus.

This Sunday — the first Sunday after Epiphany — is the Sunday each year when we com-

memorate the baptism of Jesus. It gives us an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of baptism, both for Jesus and for ourselves.

Accounts of Jesus' baptism are found in all three of the so-called "Synoptic" Gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — and, although there isn't an actual account of it in the Gospel of John, it is briefly referred to in that Gospel, as John the Baptist recalls witnessing the descent of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, of course, as today's Gospel reading from Mark makes clear. Did John recognize Jesus before he baptized him? Well, that depends on which Gospel you read. Matthew says yes he did; John says no he didn't; and Mark and Luke don't say one way or the other.

There's a certain awkwardness about the fact that Jesus was baptized by John. As we heard on the Second Sunday of Advent, and again today, John administered what Mark calls *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins* (Mark 1.4). And that raises the \$64,000 question: Why would Jesus, the sinless Son of God, have to receive "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"? If he was without sin, as we understand he was, there would've been no sin that he had to repent from or receive forgiveness for.

In Matthew's account, which we read on this Sunday last year, John, recognizing Jesus, understandably hesitates to baptize him. He says, *I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?* (Matthew 3.14). But in Mark's account, which we're reading this year, John says no such thing. Indeed, Mark reports the entire incident matter-of-factly, as if there were no awkwardness about it at all. In other words, he doesn't answer the \$64,000 question — leaving us, the readers, to speculate.

One possible answer is that, having come into the world in human form, and looking for all the world like any other human being, Jesus chose to be baptized simply to demonstrate that he was truly "with us" human beings; that he was one of us. Another possible answer is that, in preparation for his own ministry, Jesus wanted to show that he was a faithful Jew; that he took his relationship with God seriously, and that he would, therefore, be someone worth listening to.

Mark doesn't spend time explaining Jesus' actions; rather, he moves on to the phenomena that took place immediately after Jesus was baptized — phenomena that set Jesus' baptism apart from all the other baptisms that John had administered: the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the voice of God speaking from heaven, identifying Jesus as his Son.

It was a moment of revelation — Jesus' true identity as the Son of God was revealed. It was also a moment in which Jesus was empowered and equipped to take on his ministry. It was therefore a major turning point in Jesus' life. Up to then, he had been living in obscurity in Nazareth; soon afterward, he would begin his ministry, and become a very public figure.

Earlier, I said that we today undergo baptism in imitation of Jesus. Indeed, we see Jesus' baptism as the pattern for our own; that, in our own baptism, God claims us as his sons and

daughters, and gives us the Holy Spirit to equip us to live in his ways, and to serve him. This, then, distinguishes Christian baptism from the baptism that John administered. In addition to being a sign of repentance from sin and of God's forgiveness of that sin, then, Christian baptism is also a sign of God's adopting us as his children — as members of his family — and equipping us for Christian life and service.

Today's reading from the Book of Acts also makes a distinction between the baptism administered by John and Christian baptism. In that passage, the apostle Paul, arriving in Ephesus early in his third mission journey, encounters a group of "disciples" — presumably disciples of Jesus — who, he discovers, had not received the Holy Spirit when they were baptized. Indeed, when he asks them about it, they answer, *We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit* (Acts 19.2). And when he asks them, *What baptism did you receive?* they answer, *John's baptism* (Acts 19.3).

Paul then explains that John's baptism was a *preliminary* baptism, anticipating the greater baptism offered through Jesus. He tells them, *John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus* (Acts 19.4). At that point, then, the group of disciples are *baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus* (Acts 19.5), and receive the Holy Spirit, whom they had never even heard of previously (Acts 19.6). For Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, it was inconceivable that a person could be baptized without receiving the Holy Spirit. For him there was no such thing as *first-class* Christians who had received the Holy Spirit and *second-class* Christians who had not. This reinforces what the apostle Peter had said on the day of Pentecost, in Chapter 2 of Acts, when he told the crowd, *Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit* (Acts 2.38).

In Christian baptism, then, God claims us as his daughters and sons, and gives us the Holy Spirit, who enables us to *live* as God's daughters and sons. The Holy Spirit, of course, is part of God who lives within us, strengthening our faith, strengthening our relationship with God, guiding us in God's ways, and equipping and empowering us to live in God's ways. The Spirit also guides and empowers us to serve God through specific acts of service.

Earlier, I spoke of baptism as initiation. Thinking back to my high school initiation, it marked the *beginning* of my high school experience, of course; not the end. It marked the beginning of five years of going to classes, doing homework, writing essays, doing assignments of other kinds, and writing exams — as well as forming friendships with fellow students who had come to that school from elementary schools other than the one that I had gone to. The word initiation itself means beginning.

Jesus' baptism thus marked the beginning of his ministry. After he was baptized, he left the family carpentry business, and became a traveling rabbi, going from town to town throughout Galilee, and eventually even to the big city of Jerusalem — teaching people, both in synagogues and in the open air, and healing people with various diseases and disabilities.

Our own baptism also marks a beginning — the beginning of a life-long relationship with God; the beginning of a life-long relationship with other sons and daughters of God; a life of learning God’s ways and striving to live in them; a life of service to God; indeed, a life that lasts beyond death, into eternity. Regardless whether we are baptized at the age of less than two months, as I was, or at the age of sixteen, or at the age of sixty-five, baptism is intended to mark a beginning in our lives. It’s not about arriving, then; it’s about starting out.

Unlike my high school initiation, baptism initiates us into something that, ideally, has no time limit. Our life as daughters and sons of God does not come to a conclusion at the end of five years — or fifty years, or a hundred. The expectation is that it will continue for the rest of our lives — and beyond, even, into the life of the age to come.

The challenge for us, then, having begun the Christian life in our baptism, is to keep it going. We experience the true meaning of our baptism not right at the moment of our baptism, but long afterward, as we seek to live in relationship with God, as we seek to live in relationship with other children of God — our sisters and brothers in Christ, in other words — as we seek to live by God’s values and in God’s ways, and as we seek to serve God both within and outside the life and work of the church. Baptism is a starting point, not an ending. Once started, we need to keep on going, otherwise the beginning doesn’t count for much.

It’s important also that we recognize the communal nature of baptism. Contrary to what some people seem to think, baptism is not just a private transaction between God and the person being baptized. It’s much more than that. Since baptism results in our being adopted by God as his children, it necessarily means that we are now a brother or sister of all of God’s other children; that we are members of God’s family. This is why we don’t administer baptism in private, but rather in the presence of the entire congregation.

In fact, the congregation is just the setting all of us need in order to sustain and nurture our Christian life. We need the support and encouragement of our brothers and sisters in God’s family in order to prevent us from losing interest or becoming discouraged. And as much as we need that support and encouragement from others, others also need it from us.

Baptism, then, is truly an initiation — a beginning. It was so for Jesus; it is for us, too. Having begun, then, let us keep on going.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

Gracious and loving God:

Once again we give you thanks for coming among us human beings in person in Jesus Christ, to reveal yourself to us more fully than ever before, and to draw us into closer relationship with you. On this Sunday when we commemorate Jesus’ baptism, we thank you for what it teaches us about our own baptism, in which you offer us forgiveness of our sin, reconciliation with you, adoption as your children, and the presence of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus’ baptism

marked the beginning of his ministry, we recognize that our baptism marks the beginning of a life lived in relationship with you and the members of your worldwide family. Help us then to acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit in our day-to-day living, to follow his promptings, and to depend on his power; so that we may remain on the journey that began with our baptism, and may continue to make progress in becoming the kind of people you want us to be.

We thank you for the church, the worldwide community of your children, and in particular, for our own congregations. Help us all to value our relationships with our brothers and sisters in your family, and to support and encourage each other as we seek to continue on the lifelong journey that we began in baptism. Continue guiding and equipping us to serve you, not only as individuals, but also as congregations; and enable us to discern and follow your guidance.

We give thanks for all the ways you care for us and provide for our needs, and we ask for your blessing on those who have special needs today — in particular, Jim and Shauna-Lei Leslie and their family, in the recent death of Jim's sister Gail; and also Rob and Cheryl McPherson and their friend Karen Tjaden, in the death of Karen's mother; as well as others whom we name before you now: _____. We thank you for your compassion, and we pray that each one may experience your comfort, strength, encouragement, or healing, according to their situation and their needs.

We thank you also that your interest in us human beings extends to the world as a whole, and so we pray for the world's needs as well. We continue to pray for people in positions of authority, that they may have the wisdom and courage they need to make good decisions in their areas of responsibility. In this regard, we pray in particular for the provincial MLAs who this week were assigned to new positions in the cabinet: that you would guide them as they are oriented into their positions, and begin their work. We give thanks in particular that the government has recognized the need to create a new ministry of mental health; and we pray that it may be effective in responding to mental health needs in a pro-active way, especially in this stressful pandemic time.

We pray also for the government of the United States, as it deals with the aftermath of the riot at the Capitol building this past week. We pray that the political views that encouraged the attack may be thoroughly discredited and rejected; and that politicians of both parties may be motivated to work toward a more cooperative approach to governing the country.

We continue to pray for your blessing on those giving leadership in the struggle against the pandemic — here in Manitoba, across the country, and around the world. Continue to give them wisdom, we pray, as they make decisions on the necessary restrictions that we need to observe, and as they work for the most effective ways to make vaccines available, especially while they are still in short supply. Continue to bless and prosper the work of those developing additional new vaccines, we pray, so that more and more vaccines may be made available — not only here in Canada, but also around the world. Grant us all patience as we cope with the restrictions that have been put into place to minimize transmission of the virus. Help us all to follow those restrictions, and grant that they may be effective in reducing the numbers of people

requiring medical care. Bless also those whose livelihoods, businesses, and incomes are being negatively affected by the restrictions, and grant that they may receive the assistance they need to make it through this crisis. We pray for your blessing also on teachers and students, that they may receive the strength they need to cope with the uncertainties and changes that the pandemic is forcing on them.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God, and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Sisters and brothers in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to continue the process begun in your baptism —

the process of growing in your relationship with God,

and becoming the people he wants us to be.

And may God bless you:

May he continue to guide, equip, and strengthen you

in living in his ways and serving him;

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.