

## REAL PRESENCE, REAL POWER

*On the occasion of the Baptism of Peyton Grace Miller*

### Epiphany 4 – Cycle B: Mark 1:21-28

For me it has been a happy coincidence that at the very time our Confirmation class is studying the Sacrament of Holy Baptism in their two-year curriculum, we should have two actual baptisms they can witness first-hand. Two weeks ago, Abbey Grace Lindfield was baptized, and this morning, of course, we shall celebrate Peyton Grace Miller's baptism. Not only that, but the season of Epiphany begins for Sunday worshippers with the account of the Baptism of Jesus by John in the River Jordan. On that Sunday, January 8, in order to enlarge the theme of baptism, we asked Pastor Paul Bosch of our parish to open worship with a liturgy we use several times throughout the church year, the Thanksgiving for Baptism. And so, we moved the font to the front of the Sanctuary for the month of January, honoring the special emphasis baptism has assumed in our worship life right now. Traditionally, baptisms are associated with Easter and the echoes of Easter throughout the year, the white Sundays and one red Sunday on the church calendar – the little Easters of the Baptism of Jesus, the Transfiguration of Jesus, Pentecost (the red Sunday), Holy Trinity, and just before the beginning of Advent, the feast of Christ the King or as we often refer to it, the Reign of Christ. Christmas and Epiphany, also Sundays on which our vestments are white, while not echoes of Easter, anticipate Easter by referring to the conflict that will hound Jesus throughout his life and culminate on the events of Good Friday: Simeon, who had spent his life watching for God's Messiah and is overjoyed when Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple at Jerusalem, nevertheless tells Mary when he sees her baby, "...a sword will pierce your own soul too." We immediately think of Good Friday. Many of our Christmas carols, amidst all of the Christmas joy they present, also refer to the events of Good Friday. And yes, the visit of the Magi, Matthew writes, was overshadowed by Herod's fear that the birth of the Messiah would threaten his power and control over the Jewish people. Again, our thoughts are directed to the events of Good Friday and how the state eventually did put Jesus to death. When you think of it, the church year is loaded with references to the Great Three Days of Easter; and Holy Baptism itself is a mini-Easter. Last Thursday, I showed the members of the Confirmation class some photographs of the ancient fonts used in the full-immersion baptisms that were the norm during the first 1500 years of Christianity. They noticed that the fonts were similar in shape and size to caskets; that the person being baptized went under the water, was buried with water, in other words, and then came up out of the water. Jake remembered a reference to baptism as our death and resurrection, our dying and rising, and several in the class had Aha! moments. We don't automatically think of these things with our tradition of baptizing babies and pouring water over their heads instead of placing them right under the water. But the language of our rite hasn't changed as much as the ritual action: Holy Baptism, we say, is our dying to sin and rising to newness of life; or another reference says that we are baptized into Christ's death, theological shorthand for the idea that in Holy Baptism we are joined to Christ's death *and* resurrection.

Baptism in our tradition is all about love, the love of God in giving Jesus to the world, and the love of Jesus welcoming us as kith and kin. We are given a new name in baptism: we become either Jesus' sister, as Peyton does today or, if we are male, we become Jesus' brother. It is not merely a sacrament of initiation into the Body of Christ, the church, it is also a sacrament of adoption in which God names us God's own and God's beloved ones, sisters and brothers of the only-begotten Son, Jesus. The naming component of baptism proceeds from the account of Jesus' own baptism when the heavens opened and a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And so every baptism, then, becomes an echo of Jesus' own baptism, and that naming, those loving words of adoption, are as certain for us as they were for Jesus: "Peyton, you are my child; with you I am well pleased."

And as the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus when he rose up from the water, faith leads us to accept that the Holy Spirit is the unique and special grace of each and every baptism. God makes God's home with us, Holy Baptism proclaims; the Holy Spirit animates us and calls us into ministry and service, as surely as it did Jesus.

But for all of its theological richness, Holy Baptism is also God's line in the sand concerning the powers that oppose the reign of God in our world. You may often have wondered about the three renunciations of evil that parents and baptismal sponsors make as part of the baptismal rite. The renunciations have to

do with the presence of sin in the world and sin's potential to compromise our life in the Spirit; they have to do with the despair that the fear of death can create in us – a fear and a despair that can displace faith in our life having meaning and purpose. Baptism itself is a renunciation of unfaith and a proclamation that our beginning and our end are in God and in God's Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. On our baptismal candles, there is an Alpha and an Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. In Revelation, Christ is proclaimed as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end: *our* beginning and *our* end, Holy Baptism proclaims, are in God and in God's Christ. The forces that defy the wisdom of God's love say that we live to ourselves and we die to ourselves; there is nothing beyond self.

But we know better, because love invites us into relationship with one another; love invites us into community; and in that community we become aware that our community is part of the community of communities we know as the world, in which we are also a member. And as we consider the whole human family, we look beyond ourselves once more and discover life in all its fullness – life loaded with promise and blessing and vocation and meaning, beauty, joy, and peace. But we can also see how those things are so easily destroyed; how without a vision for what is true about life we are tossed about as easily as flotsam and jetsam on the sea of existence. Baptism draws a line in the sand and proclaims, "No! This is not the truth about who you are; about who we are. This is God's world, and we are called not as flotsam and jetsam, but rather to the sure foundation of God's claim on us in which is love never ends and hope springs eternal.

Holy Baptism is all about love, but Holy Baptism is also about power, God's power washing over us that we might live unencumbered by the power of evil; that our renunciations of those things that draw us from God and the blessing God seeks for our lives might be frequent and many; that we allow faith to recognize that in, with, and under the water of Holy Baptism, God is present – covering us over, calling us beloved, washing us with the Spirit of Christ, cleansing us from any flaws or imperfections that Satan could stake a claim on.

In today's Gospel, we see the full implication of our baptism into Christ. Jesus is confronted by an unclean spirit in a man he comes upon in the synagogue in Capernaum. And Jesus demonstrates power over the unclean spirit and secures God's claim on the man as God's beloved, God's own.

Holy Baptism is that very presence of Jesus in our lives that names that which is evil as evil; that reveals the only power that evil has is the power we give it. There is no shortage of sin in our world: it almost always relates to the abuse of power and the injury such abuse causes. Such abuse can be as subtle as telling a lie, taking power from another, self-justification and the consequent denial of another's rights and privileges; enjoying good fortune at the expense of another's misfortune. You can place on that paradigm virtually all the suffering in the world and see how hungry society is for gospel love and gospel justice to displace self-love and injustice.

In Holy Baptism the power and presence of God are proclaimed as the gifts we receive and need to get us through life, to live faithfully, and to do the work of discipleship. It is real presence and real power that we might have the abundant life God seeks for the whole human family. But we must claim this presence and this power for ourselves and for our church. Luther called us to remember our baptism several times a day – at the very least the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night. But realistically, much more often. It is God's means of grace for us, for us and for the saving work to which we have been called in Jesus Christ.