

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 10, 2016
Baptism of our Lord
Rev. John Crow

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 89:19-29
Acts 10:34-38
Luke 3:15-22

We've made quite a leap in time from last Sunday. Just a week ago we were celebrating the arrival of the three wise men at the Feast of Epiphany, and now we suddenly fast forward some 30 years into the future, where we find Jesus on the verge of beginning his public ministry. You may also recall that the Gospel reading for the 3rd Sunday in Advent lead right up to the point of Jesus' baptism, but stopped short. Like many key moments in the history of God's people, this scene takes place at the Jordan River. Pastors and biblical scholars typically try to gain a deeper understanding of events in the Bible by entering into the history, language, and culture of the era; however, in some cases, one can learn from doing the opposite—that is, looking at a modern equivalent to find parallels that can illuminate the original event by seeing it from a fresh perspective in the modern context. This is what I aim to do today with the baptism of Christ.

The US Army is a place where tradition is deeply respected and dutifully carried on from one generation of soldiers to the next. These traditions serve a clear purpose, and even mirror the role that liturgy plays for us here at Epworth. I was privileged to get to experience one of the most time-honored traditions of the Army in September of 2002, when I took command of the 858th Quartermaster Company at Fort Carson, Colorado. It's called a "change of command ceremony." This ceremony marked the exact time when the responsibility of command passed from the previous commander to myself. It was a public ceremony with my parents in attendance, and every soldier in the company present, so there would be no question among them as to who was now in charge. One of the best parts of the change of command ceremony was that it ended with a reception, with family present, and enough cake for everyone. When I read today's gospel passage, I recognized something from my own life: We are witnessing a change of command ceremony!

A good place to start is with the out-going commander, or in this case, John the Baptist. He was a remarkable man. He lived his life in such a way, and taught with such truth and authority, that it made people wonder if he was the promised Messiah. That should tell you something. Not just anyone could be living and

teaching in such a way that would make others wonder if he were the Messiah. Yet John made it very clear that he was not the one. John played a vital role, but he was not the commander they were looking for. I think this is a good argument against those academics who want to say that Jesus wasn't born divine, but was made a deity because he lived a life that was so in tune with God. If that was how it worked, wasn't John just as deserving of divinity?

Today's reading from Isaiah has an interesting sentence in verse 8, where God says that He will not give His glory to anyone but the Messiah. This emphasizes the special role that only the Christ could play. Not even John, with all his great qualities, could be the Messiah.

In fact, the wording of today's passage in Luke strongly emphasizes the difference between John and Jesus, as well as the transferring of authority that would be a key part of a change of command. John is very direct in saying that he is not even worthy to be a servant of Jesus, and that his baptism is not as powerful as the baptism of Jesus. There is one more element that is more subtle, but makes it very clear that there has been a change in leadership. If you notice, Luke 3:20 is the final time John is mentioned in this passage. When it continues with Jesus

being baptized in the next verse, the writer doesn't even mention the name of the one who did the baptizing. Why? Because the fact that it was John was of little importance to the inauguration of Jesus' ministry. It was also a clever little literary device that Luke actually jumps ahead in time to inform his readers that John was eventually thrown in prison. It's as if Luke can't wait to write him out of the story so he can get on with the ministry of Jesus.

Just in case there is any doubt as to who Jesus is and what he accomplished during his short ministry on earth, just review Isaiah 42:1-7, Psalm 89:28, and Acts 10:38 from today's readings. While John was a great preacher, he was clearly surpassed in every way by Jesus, the promised Messiah.

A change of command ceremony is not simply performed between the in-coming and out-going commanders; they also require the commander of the next higher unit. In my case, that was my battalion commander. In the case of our story today, it was God the Father. In fact, God showed up in a miraculous way, speaking in a voice from heaven, and allowing the Holy Spirit to appear in physical form. Psalm 89:20 and Acts 10:38 tell us that God himself anointed Jesus for His ministry, and Isaiah 42:1 prophesied that God would place his spirit upon the

Messiah. The change of command we are witnessing clearly happened under God's authority, and with His full blessing.

Beyond putting Jesus in charge of God's work on earth, our readings give us two important things the Father also did for His Son. He gave him several promises of what He would accomplish for and through Jesus, which we find in Psalm 89:21-29. He also gave him a personal affirmation. You may have noticed that the voice from Heaven didn't speak to those gathered at the Jordan, but to Jesus himself. I'm not saying that they couldn't hear God's voice, but that they were not the recipients—Jesus was. It was a very personal *my child, you're doing great, and I couldn't be more proud of you*. Who wouldn't want to hear that from their dad? It's the kind of thing a parent would tell their son or daughter at a reception following their assumption of command. Public affirmations are a rarity, but not at a big moment like this. There was no mystery within the Trinity as to where Jesus' ministry was leading, but this was a moment to celebrate!

As if a voice from heaven wasn't enough, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove. There are two things I like about this. One is that it is physical. This is the equivalent of the Holy Spirit wrapping his arms around Jesus

in a big bear hug. The second is that it was in the form of a dove. This was not by accident. We all know a dove appears in Genesis at the end of the flood narrative, but it may be easy to forget that a dove is a symbol of love in Song of Solomon. Multiple times the writer addresses his love as “my dove.” I think it is a safe interpretation to say that the Holy Spirit chose to appear as a dove as a sign of tender love for Jesus.

And isn't it just like God, that the symbolism used in starting Jesus' ministry isn't that of power, but of love. Jesus wasn't born in a palace, but in a stable. It was a dove that descended on him, not an eagle. And this change of command ceremony that would forever change the entire world didn't take place in the halls of kings with a scepter and a crown, but out in the country, with Jesus standing sopping wet in a river.

The final piece to this change of command ceremony is the audience, which includes us today. Even though those present that day were not soldiers who were prepared to follow their commander into the heat of battle, they did—as we do today—play an important role. Let me start by reminding us that we are witnesses to the authority placed upon Jesus. There should be no doubt as to

who is in charge. Jesus also sets the perfect example for us. So just as He was baptized, so too should we be baptized. Lastly, just as Jesus was baptized and commissioned for God's service, so too are we to live into our commissioning of service to God. As forgetful and sinful people, it is helpful to be reminded of our baptism, and more importantly, to make our baptism a current, daily truth—not that we get baptized daily, but that it is still just as true today as the day it happened. That is why I sprinkled you with the aspergillum at the beginning of the service. That is also, in part, why we will be partaking of the eucharist in a few minutes. It is a regular reminder of our commissioning—as witnesses to the Lordship of Christ—to take up our cross daily and follow Him.