

Sermon: Matthew 3:13-17 (Epiphany 1A)
Christ Church Riverdale, 13 January 2008
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^{NRS} **Matthew 3:13** Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

The place where I lived before moving to New York, like Riverdale, is near a body of water. Sugar Creek in Crawfordsville, Indiana, ain't exactly the Hudson, even though it has a fish advisory, too! Unlike the Hudson, Sugar Creek has lots of people paddling canoes. There are several companies that rent canoes, and will either meet you downstream when you're finished and drive you back or drive you upstream so you float back to the main office. Whichever company you rented from, though, there was one thing you could always count on—getting wet! Even if you go from dry land right into the canoe and ride in front you'd better plan on getting wet—maybe there's water sloshing around in the bottom left from the last people to use it. And if you're in the back—forget about it! You have to be in the water every time you launch or beach, or run aground, and when the water's too low you and your partner both have to get out and wade. (Sugar Creek's other name—its older name--was Rock River.) If you're canoeing in a group somebody's probably going to splash you, or even try to make you flip over. If the current is strong, you may capsize on your own, maybe you plan to beach along the way and take a swim. And whenever I would get wet on those trips, my clothes never seemed to dry out completely. So it was usually best to plan on getting wet, and staying wet.

Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus by his cousin John in the River Jordan. It was quite a long trip for Jesus to make on foot from Galilee to the area around Jerusalem where John was baptizing, and then when he got there, John didn't even want to baptize him! John's baptism was for cleansing from sin; "You should be baptizing me!" he tells Jesus. But Jesus talks him into it, and as the baptism is finishing, Matthew paints an extraordinary scene. Just as Jesus is coming up out of the water, the heavens open to him, and he sees the Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. God's voice is heard: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Water, the Spirit, and God's voice—this combination is no accident coming at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Matthew's Gospel. Remember the beginning of the book of Genesis--darkness covers the face of the deep, a wind or Spirit of God sweeps over the waters, and God speaks: "Let there be light." Water, the Spirit, and God's voice—the very beginning of creation, and by no coincidence part of the baptism of Jesus. Jesus' baptism is a new beginning, the inauguration of a new creation. God is making a fresh start, and just as God pronounced the creation to be good, God is well pleased with this beloved son.

So the Baptism of our Lord—God's starting something new in the ministry of Jesus—is

very important to remember, but that's not all. It's not all, you see, because Jesus' baptism isn't just something for us to remember with our brains, but to participate in. The Incarnation, God becoming human, takes the distance we may perceive between ourselves and God--takes the distance we may even *want* to put between ourselves and God,--and radically collapses it, closes the gap. We may want to keep God not just at arm's length, but at Heaven's distance--far away. But Jesus Christ draws us near to God and God near to us. Christ doesn't keep a safe distance from this messy world, but jumps in with both feet until the water's right up to his neck, and then dunks right in. And we have the privilege of doing the same, of sharing in the waters of baptism that began our Lord's ministry, waters where the Spirit's presence and God's voice cause a radical new beginning in our lives. In the early church, some Christians counted their age not from the date of their physical birth, but from the date of their rebirth by baptism. You can see that in 12-step recovery, too, when people celebrate their sobriety anniversary. New life begins in our baptism, and from those waters we share with our Savior flow the unique ministries God calls each of us to.

Now when Thomas is baptized in a few minutes he's not going to be dunked in a creek. We'll use a modest amount of water that will evaporate within a few minutes. But in the spiritual sense, he's going to be wet the rest of his life, and as we join in renewing the baptismal covenant together, we're taking a swim in the creek with him, as he will with those who come after him. Baptism isn't something we are finished with once it has happened in our own lives, but is a reality we live and share with the newly baptized and with others continuing to lead baptismal lives. When you're canoeing on Sugar Creek, it's best to plan on getting wet, and staying wet. But isn't that really part of the fun of a canoe trip, anyway? Life as a baptized Christian is like that, too: we keep getting wet again and again--sometimes it's formal and planned out, like renewing our vows today, other times it's as frustrating as having to get out and wade, or as unexpected as tipping over and going under. Jesus kept getting wet from his own baptism when he taught something new and controversial, when he did something unpopular or that the authorities found threatening, and he was most fully drenched, in up to his eyeballs, when he went willingly to the Cross. The baptismal life isn't taking a quick dip and then toweling off, but getting into the canoe for a long journey, where the stream carries us forward and where we keep on getting wet. The waters of baptism never leave us; we never fully dry out. It's best to plan on staying wet, but more than planning on it, let us thank God for it--thank God for continuing to bless us through the waters of baptism, and for the privilege of sharing with our Savior in staying wet with the new beginning that call us to serve.