

Baptism of Our Lord B

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

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Grace and peace to you from Christ our Lord.

First things first: a story about baptism is a great place to start a new year because, baptism is a beautiful gift of welcome and acceptance. This rite weaves together community, individual, and even creation in a relationship of hope and promise and it is simply grace upon grace upon grace.

In this wonderful story of Jesus' own baptism, we find him joining in with the whole Judean countryside and Jerusalem – another sign or example of him being “Emmanuel” (God with us.) So, you see how this text tags onto the Christmas story of God becoming *incarnate* (real flesh and blood?) Jesus was born and already we've heard about wise travelers coming to visit declaring Jesus a king. We heard about Herod's plans for Jesus' death being thwarted and a visit to the Temple in Jerusalem where Simeon and Anna see and hold in their own arms God's promise. And now Jesus is with the people and is baptized. That's a lot to have happened since Christmas! Wonderful, powerful, meaningful stories of God among us.

But, tomorrow (and for some it's happened already) it's back to reality. The tree is put away and the work schedules come out. The toys and games give way to school work and classes. All the rich foods are replaced by more responsible choices. The gifts bought on credit will need to be paid for. We know that we can't live in the goodness of Christmas 365 days a year; the challenges of life, family, politics, environment, finances, health, relationships never wait in the wings for long.

And what we are so often faced with is the question (and I am not big on making resolutions) will anything be any different at the end of 2018? Or will we simply fall back into our routines, fall in line in

class and status, repeat the well-worn paths of spending, listen to the same terrible and repeating news headlines, hear again of abuse, bullying, rogue world leaders, and an environment in crisis. Will there be yet again another person without a home or food or clothing or healthcare or friendship? Will we continue to accept that some live on the margins without equal rights or privileges? Will we simply accept a shrinking membership or have the same budget conversations at this year's AGM? You get the idea; or, could something be different?

Now, I have to tread carefully – every student at seminary is warned about the “c” word. The “c” word is so dangerous, so controversial, so feared that many pastors take the advice of their professors and never venture to say it out loud... but let me take the risk: change.

I know I've named some pretty monumental and systemic problems that can feel very overwhelming, but, change is possible. This congregation itself has been through tremendous change in the last year and we've navigated it well. We ought to be encouraged by this, we are much more resilient than we might think. And while change is difficult the hard work of traveling through it has benefits. We learn to work together. We learn to trust and support one another. We learn to lean on God more, asking for God's help. We learn that we need one another, all of us, every single person. We learn that we have an amazing gift in belonging to a church. We see that God is with us and teaching us “All are welcome; and all means all.” We discover gifts and skills in one another. We grow in love and commitment.

We can negotiate all the changes in our own lives, in this congregation, in our families and neighbourhoods, because the one thing that never changes is God's love and acceptance and presence with us. God is our touchstone, our rock, our promise, our sure-footing no matter what life throws our way.

God is the one who created the heavens and the earth – from a formless void into a tapestry of light and sound and aroma and life! God is good, so very, very good!

As we grow in relationship with this wonderful God and realize the banquet we have been welcomed into, we come to understand that there is room for more. So many people have no idea who Jesus is, what the Christmas story tells, where to find belonging and acceptance, or even to know unconditional love. So many people have been ostracized and turned away from the church because they are different. So many people don't believe God could or would forgive them for what they have done. But God does accept and love, God doesn't see who's "in" and who is "out." God does forgive. God is love. What we are learning and are part of is an incredible story that we simply cannot keep to ourselves.

The Lord be with you...

God, we thank you for your Holy Spirit, a gift in our baptism, the name of this church. We want to be brave and ask for your Spirit to move among us, to call us to where we need to be, the kind of people you desire us to be. Change us, from the inside out; change us with each new day, change us even with every failure, to be your people.

Wipe away our fears and our trappings, our laziness and our selfishness that we may learn new ways to open our doors and hearts and welcome all.

In this new year call us again to pull together in purpose and generosity so that we will find new ways to reveal the essence of your generous love in every committee, encounter, visit, activity, newsletter, and worship service. We pray that we will continue to be brave when challenges come.

And we thank you God, for your faithful presence with us this day and always. Amen.