

Sermon – First Sunday after the Epiphany

Baptism of our Lord – Matthew 3: 13-17

When I was in high school many years ago one of the subjects that I really enjoyed was geography. I was fascinated with the Australian continent, one of the oldest in the world, and also countries and places outside of Australia. During the Christmas break I searched out TV series to watch and one of the more fascinating programs I watched was called *Voyage of the Continents*.

I've always been in awe of our natural world, and indeed our cities and villages, because there is just something majestic about this planet on which we live, and in its seeming uniqueness in the heavens. The *Voyage of the Continents* series showed the way our continents were formed and the events that occurred in the 4+billion years since the planet was first a spinning sphere of molten minerals. Around 2.5billion years ago the molten surface began to cool and the cooling crust formed the first super continent. Over time the large mass began to separate into large floating tectonic plates.

The documentary traces the development of each of the earth's current continents and shows how they were once connected and the forces at play that result in their constant movement.

Geologists all over the world have been examining the minerals in rocks and finding evidence as to where the first continent formed and how they have moved to their current positions. We can experience evidence of the dynamic nature of these moving plates when we experience earthquakes, see volcanoes erupt and witness the impact of a changing environment.

Creation is a never-ending process and whilst the movements of the continents might seem imperceptible to us, over time our lands are all moving in relation to one another. The geologists predict that within one million years California will break off from mainland USA and become an island. This might seem like good news to those Californians that want to secede from the Union. Maybe not so good news if you are living in California in one million years.

The power and energy of creation is a constant in our lives. In the opening verses of Genesis we hear a description from Moses' time of the first creation activity, the creation of light. God spoke light into being first for without light nothing could evolve. Light is an essential element of creation and the fullness of creation is made known by light.

Our own creation is brought into its fullest when the light of Christ is infused into us at our baptism. We are all born into a fallen state, separated from God by the first couple's experience of free will and choice. Our separation from God makes us feel less than whole as our lives play out in much darkness. God desires restoration of our relationship and gives us the choice to make. Responding to this decision is a fascinating component of our own creation journey.

Creation of the natural environment is never stagnant as it is always evolving. At times it is imperceptible but at other times it is highly visible. We too, as part of creation, are also always evolving, even though at times we might feel like we have stagnated. Our bodies age constantly with our skin changing completely every 4 to 12 weeks depending on your age. We hopefully also continue to evolve spiritually and psychologically.

Our journey back to full relationship with God mirrors the evolving nature of the world. The real start for this journey is made manifest in our baptism. It is through the conscious act of baptism that we make a choice, either ourselves or through sponsors such as our parents and godparents, to enter a formal covenant with God that will guide our reconciliation and ongoing relationship.

Today we celebrate the feast of the Baptism of our Lord, remembering Jesus' conscious decision to be baptized by John in the flowing waters of the Jordan. Jesus wanted to be baptized to show the world what new life looked like. John knew that he was only the forerunner to a more powerful person who was coming later, who would baptize not just with water but with the Holy Spirit of God.

After Jesus and John demonstrated that the journey to full reconciliation with God commenced with the baptism of the Holy Spirit, many people who were with Jesus, were also baptized by him, demonstrating a conscious desire to be reunited with God, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. And people kept coming and they still keep coming.

In Jesus baptism the light that is God was infused in him when the Holy Spirit descended on him. At our baptism we are similarly infused with the light and spirit of Christ. The apostle John describes the impact of light and darkness in our human life this way from John 3:19-21. "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those that do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

In Matthew's account of Jesus baptism it is Jesus that sees the heavens torn apart and the spirit of God descending like a dove on him. It is Jesus that hears the voice of heaven, his father blessing him. Jesus' personal experience at his baptism becomes an epiphany for us, illuminating Jesus for us as the messiah, the Son of God and the savior of the world. Through our baptism we become an epiphany for others and so the cycle of creation and restoration turns forward.

Through Jesus and our own baptism we start the journey back to God, hoping for a deeper and deeper understanding of this important relationship. The energy that drives us forward, out of stagnation and into the fullness of creation, comes from the Holy Spirit that is infused into our hearts.

It is for this reason that baptism with the Holy Spirit has been so important for the Christian faith. It is the first of the two great sacraments, the other being the memorial Eucharist. Baptism was treated very seriously in the first couple of centuries after the church formed and was confirmed as a requirement to be a part of the church. The early church fathers devised a three-year catechumenate or time of preparation for baptism.

Baptism was only held on Easter Sunday and was only for adults who had completed their education. The need for education was great as more and more non-Jews wanted to join the church. Most had pagan understanding of the world and needed to be properly prepared to give their life to Christ.

In the early fourth century when Roman Emperor Constantine was himself converted and baptized, he decreed that Christianity was to become the state religion. Persecution of Christians largely ceased and so more and more people wanted to join the church. A three-year catechumenate became impractical and so was reduced and more days were set aside for baptisms. The reduction in preparation did lead to a blending of Christian and pagan beliefs, which created further problems for the early church.

Today the sacrament of baptism is mostly administered to infants who are sponsored by parents and godparents. It is the sponsors that make the covenant with God on behalf of the child and in doing so take on a great responsibility to help raise the child in the full knowledge of God and his Son Jesus Christ.

The baptism covenant is a personal covenant between the baptized and God that encompasses a declaration of belief in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, a commitment to learning and fellowship, sharing in the common Eucharist and in prayer. It is a commitment to try and resist evil, but if we fail, we can turn back to God and repent.

It is also a declaration that we will share our faith with the world by living as an example to the world, of seeking and serving Christ in all people, loving one's neighbor, striving for peace and justice among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being. We commit to this covenant acknowledging that we do so with God's help.

The baptism covenant should be posted on the refrigerator door of every house so that we can constantly remind ourselves what this commitment to God means. If we could only recite this covenant everyday it would go along way to sustaining us on our amazing creative life journey. Make a copy of the baptism covenant when you go home today and post it on your refrigerator door and see how many times you turn to it for guidance.

The combination of the components of the baptism covenant illuminates us with the light of Christ so that we stand by example to the world as a beacon of hope. Baptism is an essential part of our Christian identity and this covenant is the personal commitment we make with God. It is the foundation of our life.

Like the constantly shifting continents on which we live, or life in Christ is also constantly shifting as we experience the forces at play in the world around us. Baptism and the Eucharist are the sacraments that anchor our lives with God and provide us with one mighty stabilizing force.

Amen