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Church of the Holy Faith
First Sunday After the Epiphany
The Baptism of Our Lord
Is 43:1-7; Ps 29; Acts 8:14-17;
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
January 12, 2025

What is the Nature of God? Faithfulness

What would you like to know about God? Our curiosity about God starts at a young age. In 1967, Eric Marshall and Stuart Hample compiled a delightful little book entitled Children's Letters to God.¹ Questions posed include: "Dear God, in Sunday School, they told us what you do. Who does it when you are on vacation?" and "Dear God, is it true my father won't get into heaven if he uses his bowling words in the house?" and one of my favorites, "How did you know you were God?"

During the season of Epiphany, a word in Greek that means "manifestation from above" we recall and celebrate manifestations of God in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the Orthodox tradition, the word "epiphany" is replaced by "theophany": a similar, but even more specific term that means "manifestations of God." These moments in Jesus' life are gifts of revelation that God generously provides to help quench our curiosity about the nature of God. Today, the first Sunday after the Feast of the Epiphany, we commemorate The Baptism of Our Lord, a major feast day in our Episcopal tradition and the sole focus of theophany in the Orthodox tradition. Jesus' baptism is recorded in all four gospels and each gospel writer has a different perspective. Why is the baptism held in such high regard? In the baptism, not only is Jesus' earthly ministry initiated, but God's love for humanity is revealed and confirmed. Our

¹ Hample, Stuart and Marshall, Eric, Children's Letters to God, 1st Edition published Jan 1, 1967, Essandess Special Editions. Second edition published March 1, 1991, Workman Publishing Company.

curiosity about the nature of God is satisfied: God desires and offers a relationship with his Son and with us. Throughout the ages, despite our wanderings, God remains faithful. Today, we will renew our baptismal covenants and our commitment to faith in Christ. In Jesus' baptism, however, we are reminded it is God who is first and foremost faithful to us. Jesus' baptism might not disclose what happens when God is on vacation, but God's love is manifested.

Our reading from Isaiah introduces us to God's faithfulness and love. "Do not fear," says the Lord to the Israelites living in exile in Babylon, "for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." "Do not fear," God repeats, "for I am with you." The passage just prior to our Isaiah reading today is starkly different. It contains vehement words of God's anger at the Israelites' disobedience. But God never, ever stops there. God never, ever abandons, no matter how frustrating it is when his people abandon him. "You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you," God speaks through his prophet. What beautiful, comforting words! You are precious. You are honored. I love you.

Fast forward to Luke's gospel and we see and hear that these words and God's promise of faithfulness are not intended for an ancient exilic people alone. These are words for us. Luke begins his gospel with Holy Spirit revelations of faithfulness given to Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon, Anna, and finally John the Baptizer: the fulfillment of God's promise of love and redemption is at hand. When Jesus emerges from the waters of the Jordan River, revelations of God's nature that began at creation, traveled through the prophets, and was birthed in the Incarnation is brought to fruition: Emmanuel. God with us. God with US. Luke is less concerned with reporting Jesus' baptism and more focused on what occurs *after* the baptism. Jesus is in prayer, in community with the Father and the Holy Spirit. In Luke's gospel, it is when "*Jesus was praying,*" that the heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form

like a dove. The voice that comes from heaven, is an affirmation of love and unity: “*you* are my Son, the Beloved – not the third person “him” as reported in other gospels, but “*you*” – with *you* I am well pleased.” God’s faithfulness is transmitted directly to the Son. The word of the Lord conveyed through the prophet Isaiah is now reiterated to the Incarnate Son as he begins his earthly ministry: “You are precious in my sight.” Throughout Luke’s gospel, we will see this unity of love and faithfulness repeatedly. On multiple occasions, Luke remarks on Jesus’ prayer life. Jesus does nothing of his own power and authority. Only through the assurance of the support and trustworthiness of the Father and the Spirit can he make his way to the crucifixion. In his darkest hour on the cross, Jesus will cry out in desperation, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” but we know the rest of the story. Jesus was never abandoned. God’s faithfulness lifted him from death to life, from the grave to resurrection.

This faithfulness extends to all of us. In our baptism, we, too, are called by name, we too are chosen, we too are precious in God’s sight. In our Episcopal tradition, we make promises at baptism, but we also affirm baptism is not just about us and OUR faith. All our promises are made “with God’s help.” We believe baptism is a sacrament and God is the one who is doing something at baptism. In submergence in the baptismal waters, we are united with Father and Spirit through the Son. John the Baptizer proclaimed, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” The contemporary Bible, *The Message*, states it this way: “The main character in the drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house – make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.”

In light of all the burdens in today's world – New Year's Day violence in New Orleans, raging wildfires in California, senseless hatred and continued wars in Ukraine, the Middle East and elsewhere, and the countless small and large burdens in our own lives – remembering God remains faithful is a comfort. God hasn't, and doesn't, promise we will avoid hardship, but promises *when*. "*When*, not *if*, you pass through the waters, I will be with you." Remembering Jesus baptizes with fire and the Holy Spirit is a source of comfort also. Sometimes we need reminding that when we talk about the Holy Spirit, we are talking about God. The Holy Spirit, God, is our comforter and protector. The Holy Spirit, God, also empowers us to carry out the work of our baptismal promises, to share the gospel message, and to manifest to a broken world what has been manifested to us. God is faithful. We will, with God's help. Amen.