

First Sunday after Epiphany
The Baptism of Jesus
Year A

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

The first Sunday after Epiphany is always celebrated as the Baptism of Jesus. But, why did Jesus need to be baptized by John? That is a question that has plagued the church for centuries. To understand this event, we need to look at the Greek words involved. In Mark's Gospel, we read about John's baptism as the baptism of repentance. However, the Greek word used for repentance does not convey the same meaning as we might expect from the English word. *Metanoia*, the Greek word that is translated as repentance, actually means something like turning around or beginning anew. It is with this understanding that we can approach both the baptism of Jesus and the events recorded in Acts about Peter and Cornelius.

We read in scripture how Jesus was known in Nazareth as a carpenter or a worker in the building trades. He was also known as the son of Joseph, who had a similar profession. It was common in the first century for a son to follow in the family business, and this appears to be true of Jesus prior to the events we have recorded in today's Gospel reading.

When He felt that it was time for Him to begin His ministry, Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John. Although John argued with Him at first, he consented to baptize Jesus. When Jesus stated that this was "proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness," Jesus was signally that it was time for Him to change the direction of His life and to begin to proclaim the nearness of the Kingdom of God. It was time to announce His *metanoia*.

As seems to be the norm, our reading from Acts drops in at the middle of a story. In the verses prior to this reading, we remember that Peter had a vision of unclean animals being lowered to him with the command to kill and eat. The point of the episode was to convince Peter that anything God created should not be considered unclean. We also have the introduction of a Roman centurion as a believer in God – a Gentile who supported the local synagogue and was respected by the local Jews. He also experienced a vision and sent for Peter as a result of this dream. Both of these men experienced a *metanoia*, a change from their previous beliefs to one in which the Kingdom of God was open to all people. Cornelius went from a stance of military might in defense of the Roman Empire to one that accepted the teachings of Jesus. Peter turned from the stance that only Jews who followed the strict letter of the Law could be part of God's Kingdom to being open to a Kingdom of God which encompassed everyone.

Most of us were baptized as little children and few could be expected to have experienced a turning from a former life to one directed by God. Thus, we celebrate confirmation as that point in our lives when we, personally, make that commitment to turn our lives toward God. It is in the process of preparation for confirmation that we acknowledge our own *metanoia*. I must state that

this was not presented to me in my confirmation class all those years ago and you are probably thinking the same. But, in the Episcopal Church, that is what confirmation is really about.

What does it mean for us to experience *metanoia*? Each of us might have a slightly different idea, but we all experience a growing commitment to serve God and the church. Our priorities change as we mature in our faith walk. No longer is it all about *ME*, but we focus on helping others. In our egocentric culture, we stand out as those who seek to lift others up – through feeding the hungry, ensuring that people have clean water to drink, and by offering a listening heart to those who are lonely. It may not have been a deliberate change in attitude, but it is a change we all have experienced. I see it in the way we interact with those who come to us on Wednesday evenings.

As we renew our baptismal vows this morning, think on these things as we reaffirm our commitment to God in the five questions of the baptismal covenant.