January 10 - 11, 2015
Baptism of the Lord

Today we celebrate the feast of the baptism of the Lord. All four gospels tell us that Jesus came to John the Baptist at the Jordan River. Although John’s Gospel does not tell us of his baptism, we know from the other gospels that the Spirit descended on our Lord empowering him for his mission. It is the water, however, that seems to have some spiritually magnetic pull on our Lord... and all of us. Jesus comes to the Jordan, drawn there by John’s preaching, to identify fully with our humanity while affirming John’s ministry.

What is it about water that soothes our troubled souls and anchors us to our basic humanity? On a Sunday afternoon, after Masses, the only place I want to be is at my little shack by the river. One wonders why is it that year after year, millions of human beings make their way to a lake or the seashore or a babbling brook or a lazy river and there find such solace and peace?
For one thing, life is not possible without water. We can go a week or more (me? Probably 3 or 4!) without food, but we will die within days without water. Water not only hydrates our bodies, but it nourishes our souls. Baptism is a picture both of our birth out of the waters of the womb and our new birth from the womb of faith. None of us can survive without water.

Today, on this Sunday in which we remember the baptism of the Lord, what if God is inviting us again to come to the water and before and even in its nourishing gift, rediscover the very basic realities of our faith? To come to the water, following our Lord who made his way to Jordan, is to come again to who we are, born of God’s Spirit, called God’s child. But what does that mean and how might we make our way to the water and find new meaning for the journey of faith?

To come to the water is first of all to come to a deeper awareness of our humanity. Across the span of two millennia, we of the Christian faith have tended to downplay, even demonize our God-
given humanity. Being fully human is God’s gift to us. From the capacity to be autonomous to the exquisite gift of creativity to the physical attributes of strength, height, intellect, and imagination, we are humankind – male and female, young and old, tall and not-so-tall, skinny and not so skinny – are beautiful creations of God who made us in God’s image.

Our humanity is the only conveyance by which we can navigate the journey of life on this planet. There is no such thing as a disembodied or non-corporal human being. Who we are – each of us individually – is defined by the body that is our life. Though the Scripture speaks of us at times respectively as “body,” “soul,” and “spirit”, the reality is that we, like God, are a trinity of realities that cannot be understood any other way. None of us has a soul. We are a soul. We do not have a body. We are bodies with a head, torso, arms, hands, legs, feet, and millions of cells that form organs, arteries, veins, and skin. We do not have a spirit, but are spiritual, infused by God with the animating reality that makes us alive.
We also come to the water because water is the most prevalent and necessary element of life we share with all living things in our world. I wouldn't call myself a tree hugger... but how do we allow “fraking”, a process, when done incorrectly, allows deadly chemicals to seep into the water table and renders water “un usable”? If you want to be challenged, read the novel “Gray Mountain” by John Grisham. Its just a novel, right???? Water nourishes plants and animals, birds and reptiles, mountains and valleys. As the prophet reminds us, all life thirsts for water and in its good gift finds sustenance. Our Lord’s baptism in water tells us that just as water is necessary for life’s survival, human life cannot be fully human without God’s Spirit.

So the Spirit’s descent upon our Lord at his baptism is God’s validation, God’s blessing, God’s sign that his life and our life with him require the coming and indwelling of the Spirit. Whereas physical life cannot continue without water, so our spiritual life cannot exist without the water of the Spirit that quenches the thirst of our souls.
But something else is going on when we come to the water. See in
this well known story a reminder that we must come to God who
longs to bring us to God’s very heart. Just as our Lord travels from
Nazareth and comes to John at the Jordan, we too must come to the
water willingly. There no arm-twisting or demanding or insistence on
God’s part in this story. Our Lord comes to John because he chooses to
do so. We see him make that journey to the water knowing he could
have ended up someplace else. But he didn’t. And his coming to John
reminds us that we must come to the water of faith by our own choice.
No one can believe for us.

The life that never makes the decision to believe is sad indeed.
“Why can’t I believe?” One could blame life’s circumstances or a
painful childhood or parents who were abusive or absent. Sometime, in
all our lives, we must look in the mirror of reality and accept who we
are. To come to the water is to follow our Lord who discovered in that
river that God had called him to a unique mission that only he could fulfill. We, too, have our own unique destiny.

When we come to the water, when we choose to believe the good news of the gospel for ourselves, we make the most important decision of our lives. And that, my friends, is to choose the way of faith ... following Jesus Christ as the way of love and life and joy. Just as we must drink water to stay alive, we must drink of the water of the Spirit, believing in simple faith, to come alive in Christ day after day.

**Finally, we come to the water listening, looking and longing for God’s blessing.** In Mark’s telling of our Lord’s baptism, he does not suggest that Jesus came to the water to seek God’s blessing, but rather in the act of obedience, he experienced God’s blessing. Haven’t you made such a discovery in your life? Has there been a time when you extended the gift of grace to someone who had wounded you and in the giving of forgiveness found yourself simply rinsed in the water of God’s love?
The blessing God gives over and over again is so often surprising and unexpected. As Jesus came up from the Jordan, baptismal water dripping from his chin, he saw the Spirit come upon him gently, unexpectedly, lightly, surprisingly as a dove descends from the sky. It’s the same for us when we come to the water to give ourselves fully to God. We do so in worship, but more often than not, we give ourselves to God as we give our time, our energy, our talents, our labors to others who need to see the face of Jesus Christ in our faces. When such a blessing comes, it may just drip from our chins as God’s affirmation that who we are and what we are about has its life in the water of God’s love.

Just as an aside…. If it were up to me (and wouldn’t cause months of whining!) I would remove the little holy water dishes at the back of Church, so that each of us, as we entered and left were drawn to the actual Baptismal font… the biggest and best, the truest sign here of the water of life! *Convenience over symbol*…. Worth thinking about!