

WORSHIP NOTES

Baptism of Our Lord • January 8, 2012

The Season

The Christmas season concluded this past Friday (January 6) as we celebrated the Feast of Epiphany, and today, Baptism of Our Lord, begins a season that extends until Ash Wednesday. We move from one beginning to another, from Jesus coming among us in flesh, celebrated at Christmas, to his coming among us in ministry. Jesus' baptism by John, which we commemorate today, inaugurates this ministry. We begin our worship with a Thanksgiving for Baptism, and we recall that through our baptism we are incorporated into the body of Christ. Embraced by God's promise and Jesus' presence, we pray today that the Spirit descends on us again, renewing and transforming our lives.

In Word . . .

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . .” (Genesis 1:1)

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God . . .” (Mark 1:1)

Our texts today are about some spectacular beginnings. Our Old Testament reading, an excerpt from the larger creation story, is a rich and beautiful text where the Word of God calls forth the world. Our Psalm emphasizes the mighty and majestic word of God with images of a voice that thunders, breaks the cedars, and flashes forth flames of fire, shaking the wilderness. The final verse prays for Yahweh's gift of strength and peace to his people. Even when creation seems to be in chaos, the Lord is able to give strength and peace. The beginning of our Gospel echoes our reading from Advent 2, with John the Baptizer preaching about the powerful one to follow that will baptize with the Holy Spirit. The text continues with the baptism of Jesus, and Mark's account is characteristically brief. The heavens are torn apart, the Spirit descends, and a voice from heaven speaks. At the moment of Jesus' baptism, past, present, and future, earth and heaven, are drawn together and all three manifestations of God appear: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A barrier separating God from his creation has been torn away. In baptism, every Christian participates in this new creation. While we may not hear a divine voice, and the heavens are probably not torn in two, our baptism does seal our relationship to a gracious God and gives us our most fundamental identity. We emerge from the waters of baptism as new people, commissioned to live and proclaim the good news. In the beginning, God . . .

And Song . . .

Traditional (9:00)

“I Bind Unto Myself Today” is an early Christian hymn attributed to St. Patrick (372-466). The English verse paraphrase of “St. Patrick's Lorica” or breastplate was written by Cecil Frances Alexander in 1889. A lorica was a garment that was worn for protection in battle. Patrick's lorica was his song, his creedal confession. Legend has it that this was Patrick's prayer before he and his companions confronted the Druids at Tara Hill. When Patrick and his followers fled, they were miraculously transformed into deer, giving this hymn its other name, “The Deer's Cry.” It is a powerful and compelling Trinitarian hymn, and we sing it today due to its emphasis on baptism. The tune was adapted from two traditional Irish melodies by composer Charles Stanford in 1904.

Contemporary (10:30)

“Wade in the Water,” is a contemporary adaptation of a spiritual from the African American tradition. Spirituals are the religious folk songs created and first sung by African Americans in slavery. Their original composers are unknown, and they have come to be regarded as the first “signature” music of this country. This well-known spiritual seems to encourage people to be baptized in order to find hope for the future, however many historians believe the song gave advice to slaves from the south on how to escape to Canada where slavery was illegal. The arrangement we sing today is by contemporary composer and author, M.D. Ridge, with verses based on today's Gospel reading.