

Well, today we celebrate the baptism of our Lord and usually, we would have a baptism scheduled but not during COVID. And I miss baptisms, some of my favorite moments in ministry have involved baptisms. I think of the beautiful, angelic sleeping newborn who slept right through her baptism by candlelight during the Easter vigil one year. I think of the 89 year old grandfather that I baptized along with his daughter and his grandson all at the same time. And of course, I think of the baptism of my own three children and the way that I always cried before it was over.

I find baptisms to be so joyful and wonder filled. I even miss the screaming, crying babies at our baptisms who we clergy are certain are simply children destined to be choir members. There's an old baptism joke that clergy tell. It was following a baby who was baptized and her older but young, little, four year old brother was visibly upset after the baptism. His mother asked him, "What's the matter?" The little boy replied, "The priest said he hoped our baby would be raised in a good Christian home but I was hoping she could stay with us."

Baptism is so central to our faith and it reminds us of what it means to be a Christian. And as a faith leader, a thought has come to me repeatedly over the last several years. It's the realization that we as Christians have lost a sense of what is central and most basic to the Christian faith. In other words, we've lost a sense of what it means to be a Christian at the most basic level. This concern is what actually led me to put together the three year Christian Formation program that we completed just over a year ago here at St. James. But I'm clear that there's still more work to be done. Not just in the Episcopal church but in the wider church in America.

Somewhere along the way, it seems clear that we strayed and become confused about what it means to be a Christian. And the events of this past week which stem from of course, a whole host of events that proceeded it, has propped this concern into sharp focus because Christianity is not part and parcel of any political party or supremacist

ideology. And Christianity has absolutely nothing to do with nationalism or allegiances to worldly leaders.

So, when we see Jesus' flags being waved during the violence at our nation's capital this last Wednesday, it reveals the depth and breadth of how far the understanding of Christianity has strayed from Jesus in the gospels. And so, we're in that unfortunate situation of needing to again, define what Christianity is and isn't in a new and I'd say rather, urgent way. And it's a job for all of us not just for clergy and faith leaders. We all need to be communicating and being clear about the basics of the Christian faith.

In our church calendar last Wednesday, it was the Feast of Epiphany. And today's actually an extension of Epiphany as we commemorate the baptism of our Lord. Epiphany means revelation and so, it involves the revealing of truth. Wednesday itself was an epiphany, it was a revealing of something very hard and difficult about what plagues us here in the U.S. And yet I believe it was also a revelation in the sense that it was a call to us to return to the basics of the faith we profess.

Jesus' ministry began with baptism and it was an epiphany that day because in it he is revealed to be the son of God. Our life also in faith begins at baptism and that reveals our own call as children of God. Baptism is the visible sacrament of having made a very basic choice. The choice to say yes and to follow Jesus. This is what a Christian is, someone who has decided to follow Jesus in faith. In following Jesus we like him, seek God's will not our own. In following Jesus we must humble ourselves and take up our cross and sacrifice for others. In following Jesus we with him proclaim that evil is not overcome with evil but with good in the way of love.

We do well to remember today that the spirits of this world and the spirit of this age is not the spirit of Christ. We are called to discern the spirits and the times that we find ourselves in. The spirit of

this age thrives on pride, power, division, lies, confusion, hatred, fear and violence. It manifests itself as movements that grasp for power. And we see it rampant in white supremacy, we see it in systemic racism and in the demonizing of entire groups of people. We must reject the spirits of this age, it opposes the spirit of Christ. It is not of the Holy Spirit.

In stark contrast the Holy Spirit is evidenced by, manifests as, humility, self-giving and sacrifice, unity, truth, clarity, faith and love. And that's what we're called into at baptism. Today, we are at the beginning of a new year. We can all make I believe, a new year's resolution to return to the basics of our faith by simply saying yes to Jesus. Whether we're saying yes for the first or the 10000th time, cling to Jesus like never before this year, seek God's will.

Our baptismal covenant asks whether we accept Jesus as our savior, trust him and his love and promise to follow and obey him. And so, in the spirit of returning then to that very basic sense of our faith, I invite you to respond to that question now, to renew that part, that beginning of the baptismal promises today by saying, I will with God's help.

Do you accept Jesus as your savior? Do you trust him and love him and promise to follow and obey him?

I will, with God's help.

I'd like to now pray for all of us the petition that we pray at every single baptism, it's for the newly baptized but I invite you to pray it with me for yourself but also for the wider church today. Bishop Susan has been asking us of course, to pray for our nation but I believe we need to be praying for the church and our nation as well, very specifically. Please pray with me.

Deliver us, O Lord, from the way of sin and death. Open our hearts to your grace and truth. Fill us with your holy and life giving Spirit. Keep us in the

faith and communion of your holy church. Teach us to love others in the power of the Spirit. Send us into the world and witness to your love and bring us to the fullness of your peace and glory. Amen.

I have been reminded of that old song, "I Have Decided To Follow Jesus". It is such a basic way to summarize our "yes" to Jesus, and I invite you to sing it with me.

(singing) I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back, no turning back.

May we once again, embrace the simplicity and basics of our faith as we follow Jesus into 2021. And know that as we embrace the Holy Spirit, we vanquish the spirit of this age. Thanks be to God.