
The Baptism of Robert

A sermon by Canon Carolynne Williams

Evensong

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

Jesus begins his adult activities with John's baptism. Verse 1 reflects these words: "In the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God." It is the Good News of God, through Jesus, who is God's anointed, the Christ.

The first century followers of Jesus were looking for Good News. They had survived a war that took away their security. Because of the war and the reign of Herod, the Israelites were becoming weary after being in the wilderness. They were seeking comfort and a foundation that would give them peace in the midst of suffering and greed. They could rely upon and continue to seek to hear the "Good News." John the Baptist had been preaching this good news. He was bringing a message and the message was, "The Christ is coming," Wait with hope and expectation. Waiting with hope and expectation was a message that the new followers of Jesus could hear with clarity and with promise.

They understood the preparation time and the change that was suggested by John the Baptist to live a righteous life and to seek comfort from God.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, explains in his book *Antiquities of the Jews*, that John the Baptist encouraged the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice to others and piety toward God and once they had so oriented their lives, to submit to John's baptism. They were seeking the Good News as others were and to prepare for the coming of The Christ. From Josephus's perspective, the ritual act of baptism did not gain pardon for sins; rather it was a consecration of the body which implied that the soul was already cleansed.

John the Baptist's popularity was spreading. People were confessing their sins and they were preparing the way for the comforter to come. As they watched and waited with expectation and hope, the Good News was spreading throughout Judea and Galilee.

For those who were grieving their losses of finances, possessions and friends and wanted comfort, the words of Isaiah to the people who were watching both Jew and Gentile was a time of reinventing oneself, respite and comfort.

The words of Isaiah were giving instruction to the people. "Comfort O comfort my people, says your God, A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, and make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every Valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

John the Baptist was bringing a message to preclude the coming of the Lord. This message was to pique the interest of those who were seeking this message to prepare the way of the Lord "" a message of promise, life and abundance for those who were seeking an immovable foundation. Those who were seeking the Good News.

Since the time of John the Baptist spreading the news of waiting with expectation of the coming of the Christ, the Good

News, since the time of Jesus being baptized by John, since the time of the Glory of God being revealed, the words of God have been a comfort. Today all are seeking a message of comfort and love and the words of Mark, who says to us to once again prepare, reflect and receive the love of God. Prepare, reflect and receive the fullness of God's love.

When I think about being given yet another opportunity to prepare receive and give to others, I am reminded of Robert, who lives in Coronado, CA. Robert is a businessman who has been very successful in life. He and about 20 of his friends from the same community travel from Coronado to Jerusalem. These friends of Robert were represented through their varied interests, investments and supportive arms to the city; they were pillars in this community. They were on pilgrimage as eight of us from St. Philip, Holy Innocents' and St. Bart's were on pilgrimage as well to the Holy Land.

Over 12 days, we studied in the classroom at St. George's college, were housed at the Cathedral, and we followed a curriculum that retraced the steps of Jesus that included going to the River Jordan.

As you probably know, the river Jordan is not this raging river that passes by those on the shore with energy and swift flowing water. It is not a place where one would take their life into their own hands if they attempted to cross it. Rather, it is contained and somewhat calm.

As we disembarked from the bus and walked with many, many others, we all filed into the seating area of concrete seats with no cushions. We all were waiting, watching and hearing the words of God being spoken by various priests as adults and children were being baptized in the Jordan River. The same river where Jesus was baptized, over two thousand years ago, by John the Baptist.

We were all seated, waiting our turn to watch, Robert, become a witness for what he had come to believe. His friends from Coronado and his new friends from Atlanta were comforted as he and a priest from our group waded into the water together. You see, Robert had been in the wilderness for a long time. He had been without an immovable foundation and had come to believe that this message from John the Baptist included him. Nothing else seemed to quite work for him, so he said.

As Robert was immersed in the river with the words of baptism being spoken to him by the priest and to all who could hear: "I baptize you Robert, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

We watched and examined ourselves and our lives. We were once again filled with hope, anticipation and love. Love for one another and love for God.

A gift that was given to us this morning by Canon Smelser in his sermon and I will pass it on to you. Take time for yourself this advent season. Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed; think about yourself in a reflective manner and pray. Allow the love of God to permeate those places within. Even those places within use what we have been protecting. The gift for us all as we wait is rekindled love and acceptance of God's love unconditionally.

The Holy Spirit is a gift to anticipate. It is a gift to watch for, especially within ourselves as we recognize it in others.

"Come Lord Jesus."