

Baptism of Our Lord
 Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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Statistically speaking, 66% of you know the feeling – it’s a feeling like you’ve been in a place and done the same thing before, even though you know you couldn’t have. Researchers call it “d  ja vu,” which is a French phrase meaning “already seen.”¹ Today’s Gospel reading is one of those d  ja vu experiences for me. The most simplistic explanation is that we *did* read part of this story last month. At that time, the focus was on “John the baptizer;” now, the focus shifted slightly to illuminate Jesus’s baptism.

This is one of the more important episodes in Mark’s gospel. To truly understand its impact, we need to look at the Gospel’s entire arc. As a helpful tool, I’ve included for you in your bulletin an infographic created by the good people over at “The Bible Project.” (see below)



created by the Bible Project

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/08/health/deja-vu/index.html>

This infographic puts a large circle around some important places in Mark where reality was “torn apart.” In the first column, the heavens were “torn apart” at Jesus’s baptism when he is declared God’s son, the beloved. Then again, at Jesus’s transfiguration in the bottom of the second column, a voice from the clouds said that Jesus is God’s son, the beloved. Once more, at Jesus’ crucifixion at the bottom of the third column, the curtain to the holiest place in the temple was “torn” from top to bottom before the centurion declared that Jesus is God’s son.

You might be wondering, “What is the big deal? Why does calling Jesus the “Son of God” turn the world upside-down?” Great question! In Jesus’s time, specific individuals were declared to be “the Son of God,” including Jewish kings and even Caesar. To be declared “the Son of God” means that the person is God’s earthly surrogate.² If Jesus was a powerful ruler, he would have been easily accepted as the “Son of God;” however, Jesus was a commoner who assumed the title of a king or an emperor, and, well, that was wickedly political and the beginning of a revolution.

This revolution didn’t stop with the ruling leaders, it even disrupted basic religious definitions. By the next time that Jesus was described as “the Son of God” in Mark, a new definition had emerged for the title “Messiah.” The Hebrew Scriptures note that Messiah means “anointed one,” but the actions of Jesus did not support the common understanding of the Messiah. Jesus did not sit on a throne, but instead came as a servant. King Jesus did not exert military might, but instead advocated for compassionate love. Jesus’s reign was not one of accomplishment and ego-stroking, rather it was about self-emptying service. With this new definition of a “Messiah,” being God’s earthly surrogate found more in common with death than life.

² Jan Assmann (2003). *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*. Harvard University Press. pp. 300–301. Retrieved 16 March 2014.

In our baptisms, we too were summoned to follow this same trajectory. At the font we, were claimed as God's children, anointed with oil, and reminded that Jesus's life, death, and ministry is our greatest teacher. We too become God's surrogates, and that's terrifying because it feels more like a death wish than eternal life. After all, our world is on the brink of nuclear war, and Jesus rejected all forms of violence and revenge. It's reported that our nation's leaders have made disturbing remarks based on racist ideologies, and Jesus taught us to love and prioritize the disenfranchised, vulnerable, and displaced people across the globe.³ While our society was built on power, privilege, and pride, Jesus lived a strong life through service and solidarity.

Yet, in our baptisms we received an incredible gift. While most don't remember the event, you might observe a baptism and have, what I call, "baptismal déjà vu." In that moment, you experience something that you have "already seen." And it's not just water, but rather you became a participant in a history of people who, from the time of Jesus and long before, realized that God's activity in the world is counter-cultural, radical, and politically subversive. You became a part of a great story where water symbolizes something new.

As Christians, we remember that when God separated the waters above from the waters below at creation, those waters started something new. And, when God parted the Red Sea so the Israelites could walk to freedom, those waters started something new. When the heavens were torn apart at Jesus's baptism, those waters started new. When a rejected, foreign woman from a craphole country met Jesus at a well, those waters started something new.⁴ And, when you were baptized into this faith community, those waters started something new.

³ <http://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/7906>

⁴ John 4:4-26 - <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+4%3A4-26&version=NRSV>

The waters of baptism have made you one with all the baptized across the globe.⁵ In baptism, we are reminded that we have been lovingly welcomed into God's family and that we are to welcome as Christ has welcomed us. Christ has welcomed, affirmed, and included all people. So as a church, we say, that no matter your religious past, gender or gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, race, country of birth, socioeconomic or employment status, physical ability, political party, immigration status, home address, medical or psychological history you are welcome into this wet and wild group of people who are claimed as God's beloved.

So, when it seems like the little guy always gets nailed, remember our God who rejects pride and violence. When it seems like everyone is out to get what they want at any cost, remember our God who prioritizes service and love. When you come to the font, recall that you are a part of a group of faithful people who, using the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., have "the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our civilization."

Friends, I hope you have baptismal déjà vu. I pray that you find comfort in knowing that you are loved and not alone on this journey. I yearn for the day when our witness has transformed the world into a place of life-giving welcome. Let us journey together, so that we might "be the change we want to see in the world"⁶ following the way of Christ. Amen!⁷

⁵ See 1 Corinthians 12:13 and https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2313

⁶ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/24499-be-the-change-that-you-wish-to-see-in-the>

⁷ This sermon was influenced by <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/january-7-baptism-lord-mark-14-11>