

The Baptism of our Lord
The Rev. Emily Richards
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Regaining our Memory

Today is a special celebration. We gather with Brynn and Kenny and their families to welcome these precious children into God's own family. As these holy waters wash over them, we will be reminded of our baptisms and the One who calls us to be the beloved daughters and sons with whom God is well pleased. Participating in Brynn and Kenny's baptisms helps us to regain our memory and reaffirm our identity.

I want to share with you a story in which two men recall God's promises for them as they witness the baptism of a complete stranger. This story was told to me by my friend, Anne, a fellow priest in our Diocese. Her whole family had gathered this summer at Kanuga, an Episcopal retreat center in the mountains of N.C. for vacation, but even more importantly they had gathered for the baptism of Anne's granddaughter. The place they chose for this occasion may seem an unconventional one to us. But it was the perfect spot for this particular family. For, you see Anne is not the only person among them who works in the church. Anne's daughter is the Director of Youth Ministry in the Diocese of Alabama, her son-in-law is a seminarian and his mother, the other grandmother, is also an Episcopal priest. Since so many of them are otherwise occupied on Sunday mornings they decided to gather at one of their favorite places for this celebration.

It was the morning of the baptism and the two grandmother priests were busy preparing for the service at the outdoor chapel. As my friend Anne was setting up the altar, she saw out of the corner of her eye two men standing off by themselves at the edge of the woods surrounding the chapel. Both women walked over to the men and

warmly greeted them as they would any visitors on a Sunday morning at their churches. They told the women they were visiting for a few days from Texas, but volunteered no other information. Anne told the men about the service they were preparing for. She sensed the men had come to this spot for a reason and so she invited them to join her family in the service. The other grandmother chimed in, adding her own enthusiasm to the already stated invitation. To the women's surprise, the strangers accepted, joining in the celebration as if they were members of the family. At the end of the service, the men quietly slipped away without notice.

Two weeks later my friend received a note in the mail from one of the men. It said, "Dear Lady Priests, I had to write and thank you for your kind hospitality. Participating in the baptism of your granddaughter with the rest of your family meant so much to me and my son. Let me explain. We were getting ready to go home and we decided to visit one last time the altar which had been dedicated in my wife's name. We had come to Kanuga, exactly a year after her death, to remember her at the place she loved so much. On that morning we never expected to see anyone at the chapel, or to be invited into such a private celebration. I wanted you both to know that your service helped to reawaken my belief in the power of God's goodness and love. On that day your granddaughter was not the only one to be given the promise of new life. Thank you for helping me to renew my faith."

Mark writes, "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" It is at this very moment for Mark that the barrier between heaven and earth is removed. God is no longer a distant, unmovable deity sitting on a throne in the heavens far away. God has come to

dwell among us. God is on the loose among us as a “dive-bombing bird” (aka the Holy Spirit). The same force that moved across the formless void at creation now tears open the heavens and descends like a dove, making incarnate God’s love. The same voice that brought the world into being and called all of creation good is heard proclaiming the man from Nazareth as the beloved Son. Emerging from those murky Jordan waters, Jesus felt those words resonate at his core-good, precious, beloved. This is a new day for Jesus, a beginning of a journey, an offering to the world of a new way to live. At this moment humanity’s relationship with God is restored. By water and word God named and claimed Jesus as God’s own through the gift of the Spirit. By water and word God names and claims us as God’s own through the gift of the Spirit.

Invariably, life’s circumstances somehow get in the way of us remembering this promise for our lives. We forget that God dwells among us. We forget our "beloved" identity. We forget God’s word that we and all of creation are good. Laurence Hull Stookey calls our forgetfulness "spiritual amnesia" but adds that baptism is what defies our amnesia. The holy waters in our lives helps us recall our place in God’s story and reminds us that God’s creative love is still birthing us, claiming us, renewing us. God still finds a way to tear open the heavens, calling out to us with that same, clear voice in the hope that we can feel those words resonate at our very core. "You are my Son, my Daughter, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And so today we give thanks for Kenny and Brynn who help us to regain our memory, awakening in us a fresh awareness of God’s goodness and love in our lives. May the grace and wonder of these waters wash over us again. Refreshed and renewed, may we go forth into the world dripping wet with the promise of new life given to us this day.

Amen.