

Sermon preached by
The Reverend William J. Eakins
at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, Connecticut
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For many years I was a regular visitor to Elkhorn Ranch high up in the mountains of Montana. Sage Creek, a shallow stream about four feet wide flows right through the middle of the ranch on its way to the Gallatin River. The Gallatin is one of the three rivers that come together at Three Forks, Montana, to form the Missouri. That great river then flows east and south for over 2,300 miles, down from the mountains and the hills and across the plains until it joins the Mississippi. The mighty Mississippi then flows south for some 1,200 miles until it finally empties into the Gulf of Mexico. When I used to cross Sage Creek, I liked to imagine what might happen if I should throw a stick over the side of the bridge into the babbling water sliding beneath. And one day I did. Who knows where that stick ended up?

I am reminded of Sage Creek this morning as we celebrate the Baptism of Christ. Jesus' life, as told in the Gospel, is full of drama and miracles, teaching and healing. His Baptism seems a rather small event, but the Gospels insist on its preeminence, its importance, its foundation to the story.

At the time of his Baptism, thirty years have flown by since Jesus' birth. Jesus has come to the banks of the Jordan River where he hears John the Baptist tell the crowds to get ready for the new age that God is about to bring into being. And when Jesus wades out into Jordan's stream and John immerses him in the current, he emerges with a new identity. For when Jesus comes up out of the water, God's Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove and a voice comes from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased."

All of Jesus' life thereafter – his bold and authoritative teaching, his healing of the sick in body and soul, his journey up to Jerusalem and confrontation with the authorities there, his death upon the cross and his resurrection from the tomb – all have their origin in Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan. The whole Gospel story begins with Jesus's immersion in the river's flow.

Jesus had always known that he was the son of Mary and Joseph, but since he was a boy, Jesus had a sense of a greater identity than just being the child of his parents. There are those words of surprise and rebuke when Mary and Joseph come to fetch Jesus home from the temple. "Do you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" Over the subsequent years that Jesus spent in Nazareth, he seems to have come to a growing conviction that his identity could only be adequately expressed in relationship with the God he had come to know as father. Jesus's Baptism in the Jordan confirmed the truth of this conviction.

Jesus' Baptism also confirmed his sense of purpose. As God's beloved Son, Jesus was not only assured of his intimate connection with God; he was given a commission to act on God's behalf. The prophets said of God's Chosen One that he would be a light to the nations, open the eyes of blind, and bring out those who sit in darkness from their prisons. All that Jesus said and did following his Baptism makes it clear that Jesus was intent on carrying out this divine mission of healing and liberation, of making whole a broken world.

Jesus' Baptism not only bestows Jesus' identity and purpose, it points to the source of his power. The Gospel tells us that as Jesus came up out of the water the Holy Spirit came upon him like a dove, a sign that God was in Jesus, speaking and acting through him.

What of our own Baptism? Whether we waded out into a stream or whether a bit of water was poured over our heads, the water of Baptism is the source of our identity, purpose and power as it was for Jesus.

I am moved by the story of a first grade teacher in an inner city school who was feeling frustrated and inadequate in her overwhelming job. She was thinking of quitting when an unexpected revelation changed her mind. It happened when the woman who sat next to her in a night school class leaned over and said, "Say, I met one of your former students the other day. I was waiting for the bus with a little girl who was waiting there too. The girl said that she was now in the third grade and she liked her teacher, and then she opened her book bag and took a school photo from it and said, 'But this is the teacher I really love.' It was you." All the way home that night the child's words echoed in the teacher's mind and in her heart, and the next morning she returned to her classroom and to her vocation with renewed commitment and enthusiasm.

That small comment changed a life and changed the lives of all the children that teacher taught in the years ahead. It was like the little stick I threw into Sage Creek. I didn't know if it would get stuck a mile downstream or end up in the Gulf of Mexico. It just depended on how the currents flowed.

I think that as Christians we are called to keep on throwing sticks, as it were, unsure of their destination, but trusting God to carry them where they can be best used. So we are called to support the missions of this parish, to give what we can in order that our children might learn the stories of their faith and that children in Haiti might learn how to read. We are called to evangelize, to tell our belief in the Good News of God's love for every one of us so that those who mourn and those who feel like they don't matter will have their hearts uplifted and know that they do matter. We are called to build strong connections with our neighbors, to share our joys and our needs with them, so that we can remember and give thanks for all our blessings and support each other in Christ's name. We are called to come to this Christian community Sunday after Sunday even when it is freezing cold outside because we need to build a firm foundation and not wait until calamity strikes us. We are called to keep on throwing out sticks, speaking out against practices and policies and words that demean and damage God's children, for they are our brothers and sisters.

We were called to do these things when we were baptized. Our Baptism was more than a christening party with a fluffy dress and lace booties, a cake and Grandma and Grandpa here for the day. Our Baptism, like Jesus' Baptism, gave us identity, purpose and power – and the responsibility to behave as Christian people.

On the next two Sundays at St. John's, we will see our newest Christians baptized. We will watch them go to the font and likely hear them fuss when they get splashed, and we will make promises. We will be asked, "Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support this person in his life in Christ?" and likely we will say, "We will." That commitment matters. Don't say it if you don't mean it. People are baptized into a community of faith because no one can be a Christian alone. And so we need to take that commitment seriously and if we don't see the child in church, tell the parents that we miss them. We need to take that commitment seriously and watch our language and watch our behavior and live like God is watching (because God is). We need to act like Christians because we have received our identity as Christians.

When I was first ordained I became very aware of the collar around my neck. I was aware that I was publically identified as a Christian, and that made a difference. It is hard to swoop your grocery cart to the head of the line when you are wearing a collar. But you too have been marked as Christ's own forever; you too have had the cross of Jesus traced on your forehead right after the Baptismal water was poured on you. You too have been given a mission to be Christ's hands and feet in the world. Christ has no hands or feet but ours.