

Epiphany 1, Year C
The Baptism of Our Lord
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St. James, Wheat Ridge

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“A long time ago –
yet somehow not so very long –
when all the animals and rocks and winds and waters
and trees and birds and fish
and all the beings of the world could speak
and understand each other,
there began an argument.”

Thus begins the beloved children’s book, “Old Turtle,”
by Douglas Wood.

Maybe some of you know this story.

Maybe some of you have read it to your children or your grandchildren.

If so, maybe it has brought tears to your eyes,
as it has brought to mine.

In the story, which begins in the time before humans,
the different elements of creation argue as to the nature of God.

The wind believes that God is never still.

The rock was equally certain that God never moves.

The mountain was sure that God was a snowy peak,
high above the clouds.

The fish argued that God surely had a more fluid existence.

Of course, they all simply imagined God to be
just as they were.

They made God into something like their own image.

And the argument got louder and louder and louder
until at last a new voice spoke.

That voice rumbled loudly, like thunder.

And whispered softly, like butterfly sneezes.

And the voice seemed to come from Old Turtle.

Old Turtle steps in with wisdom and words of vision and empathy.
“God is indeed deep,” she said to the fishes of the sea,
“and much higher than high,” she said to the mountains.
“God is swift and free as the wind,
and still and solid as a great oak.”

“God is all that we dream of, and all that we seek,
all that we came from, and all that we can find.
God is,” says Old Turtle.

Old Turtle goes on to tell the world
that God is about to do a new thing.
That God is going to send a family of beings into it,
that will be strange and wonderful,
and reminders of all that God is.
They will be strong, yet tender, Old Turtle says,
a message of love from God to the earth,
and a prayer from the earth back to God.

And the people came.
But the people forgot.
Forgot that they were a message of love
and a prayer to God.

They began to argue about who knew God and who did not,
and where God was, and was not,
and whether God was, or was not.

And the people hurt one another.
And they hurt the earth.
Until finally even the forests began to die,
and the rivers and the oceans
and the plants and the animals
and the earth itself began to die,
because the people could not remember who they were,
or where God was.

Until one day, there came a voice
like the growling of thunder,
but as soft as butterfly sneezes.

The voice spoke with love.
 It seemed to be the voice of the mountain,
 who acknowledged that it could sometimes see God
 swimming in the dark, blue depths of the sea.
 And the ocean sighed that God was often among the snow-capped peaks.
 And the stone claimed that it sometimes felt God's breath as she blew by.
 And the breeze whispered that she felt his still presence among the rocks.
 And at last the people listened, and began to hear,
 and began to see God in one another,
 and in the beauty of all the earth.
 Old Turtle smiled.
 And so did God.

In this charming, touching story we come to see
 that in speaking of our own experiences of God,
 and in listening to others' experiences,
 what really matters
 is that our words arise from our own sense of feeling that we are loved.
 If we are to live the way Jesus did,
 we have to know that we, too, are beloved by God.

In a few minutes, we're going to renew our own baptismal vows,
 because on this day
 on which we remember and celebrate our Lord's baptism,
 we need to remind ourselves
 that the ministry of all the baptized
 must be understood in connection with Jesus's baptism.
 Jesus doesn't begin his ministry
 until first he is told again who he is,
 and to whom he belongs.
 "You are my Beloved," says a voice that comes rumbling from heaven,
 and descends on him softly like a dove.
 "With you I am well pleased."

Jesus's ministry exists as an expression
 of his identity as God's beloved child.
 And the same is true for each of us.
 We don't have to ask "What would Jesus do?"
 as though we were simply trying to imitate him.
 Rather, we live out our ministries because we, too, know who we are.

We are the beloved children of God,
witnesses of Christ,
and beneficiaries of the salvation he brings.

As baptized Christians
our call is to bring justice,
and to serve the cause of what's right,
to be part of God's mission of liberating the suffering,
the oppressed, and the hungry.

"Do not fear for I have redeemed you,"
God promises Israel in the words of the prophet Isaiah.
In other words, God is saying,
"Don't worry. I've got your back."
That promise, previously made to God's people,
is personalized for Jesus at his baptism.

Those of us who are marked as Christ's own forever
are also meant to hear that promise,
and to anticipate the empowerment that comes with it.

We live in a world that is not always a kind world.
Not a world that seems to be heading in the right direction.

We live in a world where hateful words get volleyed back and forth.
We live in a world that is so polarized
that even to speak of clear injustice and obvious oppression
opens you up to being called partisan and political.

We live in a world where parents and children fleeing horrendous oppression
in countries that are not safe for them
are still being separated at our borders,
and some may never be reunited.

We live in a world where all of us,
regardless of our political convictions
feel under siege and at odds,
like long-held friendships are fraying.

Yet no matter how much we may disagree with others,
no matter how misguided or cruel or naïve we may think they are,
it's important to remember that they, too,
are God's beloved children.

Here, in the midst of all that discourages us,
in the midst of all that might make us afraid,
it's worth remembering that God is near to us,
just as God was near to Jesus as he stood there in the River Jordan,
with so much still ahead of him.
As he moved through it all, step by step,
Jesus knew that he was God's beloved child.
Whether we can remember our baptisms
is less important than remembering
that we too are blessed and beloved.

The life of faith is always a life of surprises.
Any one of us may just find ourselves
standing waist deep in waters,
hearing voices, seeing doves,
discovering things about ourselves that our souls have yearned to know.
As we move through it all,
we can do so confidently,
knowing that we too are Gods Beloved children.
When we pass through the waters,
God will be with us;
and the rivers will not overwhelm us.
When we walk through fire we shall not be burned.
Because we are precious in Gods sight.
Amen.