

First Sunday after Epiphany
Isaiah 43:1-7, Psalm 29, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
January 10, 2015
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This morning is the First Sunday of Epiphany, which is always The Baptism of Our Lord, and this year it is also Episcopal Church Women's Sunday. I will keep my sermon a little shorter to give time later on to hear from our ECW president, Carolyn Thacker.

Just as a reminder, "epiphany" is a Greek word meaning "to make manifest, to show forth or to reveal." The Epiphany season began last Wednesday, always January 6th, with the arrival of the wise men to Mary and Joseph's home in Bethlehem, according to Matthew. These Gentiles from afar follow a star to give homage and present their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant child, Jesus. This shows not only that Jesus is royalty as a divine son, but also that his reign extends beyond that of just Israel to the entire known world. Jesus is revealed as Lord of all by Matthew's visit of the magi.

This morning Jesus, now an adult, receives his own epiphany along with us, the readers. After his baptism and while he is praying, the heavens are opened, the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and he is proclaimed as God's Beloved Son.

If Jesus didn't know before this that he was a special person, this experience of baptism will leave no doubt. From here he will travel to the wilderness and spend 40 days discovering what this epiphany at the Jordan River means and what he is to do next – more about that on the first Sunday of Lent.

One of the unique differences between Luke's telling of Jesus' baptism and similar versions in Matthew and Mark is that here Jesus is praying when the epiphany occurs. Luke emphasizes prayer throughout his gospel. Luke records Jesus being at prayer on nine separate occasions.

How essential is prayer to our lives as spiritual persons, living in the Spirit, living in God?

Several years ago, Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest, professor and writer, published an article about an incident her granddaughter, Madeline, had not long after she had lost a close friend and her parents' divorce.

On her birthday, her grandfather told her to make a wish before she blew out the candles on her cake. It was obvious to everyone that she hesitated for some time. She had previously wished for her friend to live and for her parents to be reconciled, neither of which happened. So what good was wishing for something on her birthday?

As a result of this occurrence, Barbara spent a good deal of time thinking about the difference between wishing and praying and concluded that they weren't much different. She wanted to encourage her granddaughter to pray even if she couldn't expect God to answer her prayers just the way Madeline wanted them to be answered.

Barbara wrote the following. "What I want Madeline to know is that the best thing about prayer is the relationship itself. Whether or not she gets what she asks for, I want her to keep asking. I want her to pester God the same way she pesters her mother, thinking of 12 different ways to plead her case. I want her to long for God the same way she longs for her father, holding fast to him even when his chair is empty."

She concluded the article by writing, "One day when Madeline asks me outright whether prayer really works, I am going to say, 'Oh, sweetie, of course it does.

It keeps our heart chasing after God's heart.

It's how we bother God,

and how he bothers us back.

There's nothing that works better than that.'"

For many of us busy people, including myself, the extent of our prayer life is too often sending off what we might call today "texting prayers." That is a quick one liner such as, "Lord, be with Bruce." Or "God, heal Lucy" as we dash between activities. This style of prayer is very different from what Barbara Brown Taylor is suggesting or what Jesus practiced throughout his ministry. That kind of prayer requires that some real time be set aside, like when we decide to sit down and catch up with a friend on the phone, at lunch, over tea or during a walk together.

Of supreme importance is taking enough time to try to hear regularly what God most wants to tell us.

"I have redeemed you.

I have called you by name.

You are mine.

You are my beloved.

I will be with you always.

You are precious in my sight.

I love you."

The biggest trap we can fall into is thinking that we have to somehow earn God's love. When our children were born, did they have to earn our love? No, something truly unexpected and amazing happened when we first held them in our arms. We fell head over heels in love with them. Is it possible that God loves us just that same way our entire lives? I believe so.

It had to have been during these extended periods of time in prayer, like after his baptism, that the knowledge of God moved from Jesus' head to his heart. God wants us to be connected at the gut level, the soul level. God wants to move our faith from the surface to the very depths of our being. The God seed may have been planted at our baptism, but it comes to full flower largely through our time spent in prayer.

The weekly communion is another chance to eat and drink God in. Relish every moment. Today when we recall Jesus' baptism, remember your own as well. Put some of this water on your forehead today and believe again with greater certainty that you are Christ's own forever.
AMEN.