

# The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ

January 10, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year B: Isaiah 42:1–9; Psalm 89:20–29; Acts 10:34–38; Mark 1:1–11\**

In Mark, after Jesus' transfiguration,<sup>1</sup> Jesus will tell the three disciples he has brought with him to the mountain, Peter, James, and John, "to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of man should have risen from the dead." Only Mark's Jesus is a Jesus who does not know that his disciples did not understand what they had seen and heard on the mountain, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." In Mark, these words will be spoken by the person we can call the first to believe in the Crucified, "the centurion, who stood facing [Jesus on the cross], saw that he thus breathed his last, [and] said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God!'"<sup>2</sup>

Mark's purpose in writing is to help people be aware of God's presence among us human beings who were made in God's image. John the Baptist washed men and women in the Jordan and then invited them to "change their minds"—the basic meaning of *μετάνοια*, the Greek word here. (I prefer "change of mind" to "repentance."<sup>3</sup>) And when they begin to change their minds—become open to God's reality—they would be ready to begin to believe that Jesus was, in English, the Anointed One, in Hebrew, the Messiah, in Greek, the Christ, in other words—the Son of God.

As most of you may know, I grew up Southern Baptist, with my dad's parents and relatives being Roman Catholic. Conversion by adults before baptism is an early norm for Christian community. There was a widespread movement for adult baptism in the sixteenth-century Europe. It was cruelly repressed.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 9:2–13.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 15:39.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Behm, "μετανοέω, μετάνοια," *Theological Dictionary of New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, trans. and ed. G.W. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1964–1976), 4:975–1008.

The different groups were called “Anabaptists”—that is re-baptizers—but the prefix “a-n-a” would be dropped over time. A great number of those who believed in baptizing only adult believers did not recognize their baptisms as infants as a real washing to a new life and relationship with God. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* says, “Those put to death probably ran into the tens of thousands.”<sup>4</sup> Too many pastors, armed with political power, have not sought out the sheep who were lost but tortured and condemned them. The Inquisition called burning at the stake of a person judged to be a heretic, “An Act of Faith.”<sup>5</sup>

I was baptized when I was ten—that’s when children in the church that I attended as a child came forward during an altar call. Most adult baptisms I’ve seen in Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches, people go into the water facedown. That’s not the Baptist way. Baptist ministers let a person fall back into the water. He or she has no control, instead there’s a letting go, a release. You’re told to hold your breath. The minister will have a handkerchief to close a person’s nose. You really do experience a letting go of an old life.

Over the course of my life, I’ve learned to be open to seeing God working in more ways than I thought possible as a child influenced by Southern Baptist and Irish Roman Catholic rigidities—only one of my great-great grandparents on my father’s side was not Irish. My German great-great grandfather, Ralph Gerth. What I can’t pinpoint is when something changed during, maybe my thirties, and I began to wonder more often, “Is there something more to know about a subject?” or “Am I closing myself off to something new?” The people who were ready to listen to John, were ready for something new.

We know from the New Testament and the writings of the historian Josephus that as Jesus was being born, Judea and the surrounding areas were a complicated place to be. They were ruled by Rome. Taxation was

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<sup>4</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. “Anabaptists,” 47–48.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, s.v. “Inquisition,” 705–06.

heavy. Opportunities abounded for zealots who wanted to gain power over others. Many came along and were crushed.

There has not been a temple in Jerusalem since 70 A.D. when it was destroyed by Rome putting down the First Great Jewish Revolt—there would be another in the next century. After that, in the year 136, Jews would be banished from Jerusalem for the next 225 years.<sup>6</sup>

A few words about the wilderness, the desert. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the wilderness is where the Hebrews experience freedom. But it becomes the place they will wander until they are ready to follow God to a land they had not known before, only heard about.

Belief in a God existing apart from the created world seems preposterous to a vast number of people today, a God who knows and cares about each person who has ever lived or will live.

The narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures relate over and over again the unfaithfulness of kings, prophets, and priests, not to mention those who cheat and steal, who are deceitful and unjust in their dealings with others.

Many of us can bear witness that in the dark moments, if you will, of our lives, God's presence can make its way. But it doesn't always work out the way we hope it will.

This morning brought the news this morning that the man who ran the renovation of Penn Station had killed himself in March a week after his fortieth birthday. His name was Noah Joseph Evans. He had grown up Roman Catholic. He went to an Episcopal boarding school. His partner was with him since graduate school in Oxford. His family did not accept his sexuality. You can read the article in the *New York Post*.<sup>7</sup> There's a newly designed Art-Deco clock in the great hall. It was one of the last big points

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<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_Jerusalem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_Jerusalem), (accessed 10 January 2021).

<sup>7</sup> <https://nypost.com/2021/01/09/moynihan-train-hall-czar-killed-himself-as-pressure-mounted/>, (accessed 10 January 2021).

of contention and stress for him. I will always look at the restored, if you will, Penn Station with him in the back of my mind.

I close with a prayer adapted for the first American Prayer Book, from *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, published in 1651 by Jeremy Taylor, then a priest of the Church of England, later a bishop in the Church of Ireland.<sup>8</sup>

*O God, whose days are without end, and whose mercies cannot be numbered: Make us, we beseech thee, deeply sensible of the shortness and uncertainty of life; and let thy Holy Spirit lead us in holiness and righteousness all our days; that, when we shall have served thee in our generation, we may be gathered unto our fathers, having the testimony of a good conscience; in the communion of the Catholic Church; in the confidence of a certain faith; in the comfort of a reasonable, religious, and holy hope; in favor with thee our God; and in perfect charity with the world. All which we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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<sup>8</sup> Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 316.