

Apostles Anglican Church
The Baptism of our Lord (8 Jan 2017)
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The Baptism of our Lord: In Part and in Whole

The Lord has shown forth his glory;
O come, let us adore him:
in the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I understand that there are people in the world who actually like jigsaw puzzles – who quite contentedly fritter away precious hours of their earthly existence moving little cardboard picture pieces around a table trying desperately to force essentially round projections into essentially square cutouts, and all to reproduce a mangled version of a picture they already have on the box top. Go figure.

But, in all fairness, there are some important life-skills that can be learned by working jigsaw puzzles: conflict resolution, for example, like that necessary when you finally realize that the person across the table from you has – *for the last 30 minutes* – been hoarding the *one piece* you've been searching for, desperately trying to complete the section you've been working on *forever*. Or, how to handle life's disappointments, great and small, like getting 4,999 pieces of the 5,000 piece jigsaw puzzle the box promised. Or, how to live with the disillusionment of accomplishing a great task only to see it fall apart in the end – like completing the puzzle only to take it apart, stuff it in the box, and lose one piece in the process.

Of course, wonderful things really can and often do happen when people sit down together around a table over a puzzle, when they talk and listen to one another, laugh and swap stories, and work together on a common goal. That's no small thing in today's culture when seemingly everyone is shouting and no one is listening, when humor is in short supply and everyone is perpetually offended, when argument is rife and cooperation is rare. It might not be a bad thing if enemies ancient and modern would sit down together to work a jigsaw puzzle.

What's more, puzzles certainly do teach patience and focus, two traits in short supply in a generation used to instant gratification and constant distraction. Team work, problem solving, pattern recognition, spending time with real people you love instead of virtual friends you've never met, and just slowing down a bit to breathe: these might be among the benefits of puzzles, too.

And jigsaw puzzles teach us something important about the relationship between part and whole. Each piece of the puzzle, each part of it derives its meaning, its significance from its place in the whole, just as the whole derives its meaning, its significance from the union of the individual pieces. The part is nothing without the whole and the whole is literally nothing without the parts. The trick, of course, is seeing how everything fits together, how the part both reflects and illuminates the whole, and how the whole both gives meaning to and receives meaning from the parts.

The Baptism of our Lord – which we observe this day – is a piece of the complex jigsaw puzzle of our redemption. It derives its meaning, its significance from its place in the whole of God’s plan, just as it contributes its meaning and significance to the whole. The trick, of course, lies in seeing how everything fits together, how the Baptism of our Lord both reflects and illuminates the whole story of our redemption, and how the whole story both gives meaning to and receives meaning from this holy event.

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:13-17).

How does this holy event, this part contribute to the whole of God’s plan? How does it fit into the story of our redemption? We must start at the beginning.

¹In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

³And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light (Gen 1:1-3).

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men (John 1:1-4).

These are two “hymns” of creation – one from Genesis and one from the Gospel of John – two hymns of creation sung in beautiful harmony, praising God the Father, creator of heaven and earth; God the Son – the Word – by whom, through whom, and for whom all things were created; God the Holy Spirit brooding over the face of the deep, chaotic waters, superintending creation, inspiring creation; God the three-in-one and the one-in-three. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit bringing forth life out of the waters: this is creation. And on that day at the Jordan River, when Jesus came to the water, our three-personed God was at work again. God the Son – the Word of God incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth – steps into the face of the deep, into the chaos of fallen creation and fallen man as he steps into the waters of the Jordan. God the Father speaks a word of new creation, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” God the Holy Spirit broods over it all and descends upon Jesus with divine benediction. When Jesus steps forth from the waters of the Jordan, it is nothing less than new creation; he is both the new Adam – man restored to his original glory – and the God who created Adam in glory. Once again God the Father has said, “Let there be light,” and there was and is and ever shall be light and life in Jesus. Once again God has breathed his Spirit into the world and has begun to make all things new. Is it any wonder that from this very moment Jesus begins to proclaim, “The Kingdom of God is at hand”? The Baptism of our Lord is nothing less than the dawn of new creation, nothing less than the inauguration of the Kingdom of God. The Baptism of our Lord takes its proper place as part of the grand story of creation.

But the story moves on from creation to crisis. Man was created to be the image bearers of God, to be God’s priests in the temple of creation. But man chose another way and another master and brought himself and creation to ruin. Exiled from Eden, deprived of the presence of God, subjected to death – mankind and all creation began a downward spiral of evil and futility until:

⁵The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

⁶And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ⁷So the LORD said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.”

⁸But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD (Gen 6:5-8).

And God prepared the waters as Noah prepared the ark. At the appointed time, the waters above and the waters below – separated at creation – rushed together in the undoing of creation, in judgment and in cleansing. “And the waters prevailed on the earth 150 days” (Gen 7:24), until every living thing with breath in it was no more, save

Noah, his wife, his three sons with their wives, and a representative pair of every species of animal. This is a sobering story of judgment – of judgment tempered with mercy. For God rescued from the waters of judgment a righteous remnant to be his own, to start anew and to work toward the restoration of all creation. What was the sign that God’s mercy triumphed over his judgment?

⁸Then [Noah] sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. ⁹But the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. ¹⁰He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. ¹¹And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. ¹²Then he waited another seven days and sent forth the dove, and she did not return to him anymore (Gen 8:8-12).

On that day at the Jordan River, Jesus enters the waters and is thrust underneath them by John the Baptist, drowned in the cleansing flood of God’s judgment as surely as Noah’s generation perished in the flood. And just when it seems that judgment has prevailed, a gasping Jesus is hauled out alive, rescued by the ark of John’s strong arms and the mercy of God Almighty. And in confirmation that God’s mercy prevails over his judgment, that God knows how to rescue a righteous remnant, a dove descends – the Holy Spirit coming to rest on Jesus: all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Then, like Noah exiting the ark on dry ground, Jesus clambers up the banks of the Jordan to proclaim, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” The Baptism of our Lord is a rehearsal of the flood and the ark and judgment and mercy and of God’s intent to have for himself – through Jesus our Lord – a holy people, a kingdom of priests who once again bear his image as fully as man can. The Baptism of our Lord takes its proper place as part of the grand story of judgment and mercy.

After the flood, generations come and go. The Tower of Babel rises and falls; language is confused and people scatter. Tribes and states and kingdoms and cultures form. From beyond the Euphrates, God calls a man – a childless man, Abram – to go where he is sent, to follow where he is led, to father many nations, to father God’s own chosen people through whom God will redeem all nations and all creation. God makes a covenant with Abram: I will be your God and you will be my people; you will be faithful to me and I will give you sons and daughters as the sand of the sea and the stars of the heavens, and I will give you a land in which to dwell securely. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: from father to son the covenant is passed down and renewed.

Abraham's grandson, Jacob – renamed Israel by God – sojourns for a time in Egypt, he and all his family. This family grows into a people, the Hebrews, a nation within a nation. Initially blessed by the Pharaoh, they are now feared by Pharaoh's son and his sons after him, and are subjugated and enslaved. Far from Egypt, in the land of Midian, God appears to a shepherd – a Hebrew himself, raised as an Egyptian, and now exiled from that land. From the midst of a bush that burns but is not consumed, God speaks to this shepherd, this Moses: I have heard the cry of my people in Egypt and have come to deliver them; go tell Pharaoh to let my people go.

Through Moses, God works wonders before Pharaoh and demands the release of his people. When Pharaoh refuses and hardens his heart, God sends plagues upon Egypt to judge Egypt's false gods, to punish its injustice, to destroy its power and to liberate his people. The tenth and final plague is the most devastating of all: the death of the firstborn sons of Egypt. The Hebrews are spared this misery by their sacrifice of a lamb and by the presence of its blood on the door posts and lintels of their homes.

Now broken, Egypt compels the Hebrews to leave, and so they do – 600,000 men in a great exodus after 430 years in Egypt. Moses leads the people by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea. When Pharaoh learns this, in a moment of remorse and anger, he assembles his army and marches out to recapture or destroy the Hebrews, who now find themselves trapped between the army of Egypt and the waters of the Red Sea. In their distress, the Hebrews cry out to God.

¹⁵ The LORD said to Moses, "Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. ¹⁶ Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷ And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. ¹⁸ And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen" (Ex 14:15-18).

And so it was. God makes a way through the waters – a way of liberation and redemption for his people. They enter the sea in slavery; they exit the sea in freedom. They have been redeemed by the firstborn sons of Egypt and the blood of the Passover lamb; they are liberated by the waters.

On that day at the Jordan River, Israel enters the waters again in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. They enter the water in slavery, not to Egypt, but to sin. They exit the water

in freedom. They have been redeemed by the firstborn of all creation, by the only-begotten Son of God. They have been redeemed by the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The Baptism of our Lord is nothing less than a new Exodus – not just for Israel, but for all those enslaved by sin and death, which is to say all of us. We have been set free; we have been redeemed: Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! And the Baptism of our Lord is the clear proclamation of what God has done and is doing to liberate and redeem all creation in and through our Lord Jesus Christ. The Baptism of our Lord takes its proper place as part of the grand story of liberation and redemption.

And now time fails us. We cannot complete the story, but we also cannot leave it without one final episode. Some forty years after the Exodus, Moses' successor Joshua – Yeshua – leads the Hebrews to the banks of the Jordan River, a raging torrent at the time of the harvest. Across it lies the land that God promised to Abraham centuries before; across it lies the fulfillment of the covenant, the fulfillment of God's promises. At God's command, the people march forward into the water, led by the priests carrying the ark of the covenant. As soon as the priests' feet were dipped into the brink of the flood, the waters above were cut off and a way was made through the Jordan, and all Israel passed through on dry ground into the land of promise.

On that day – on this day when we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord – another Yeshua comes to the Jordan, Jesus of Nazareth. The fulfillment of the covenant, the fulfillment of all God's promises to put death to death, to renew the earth, to redeem all creation, to be our God and to make us his people, lie on the other side – not just of the Jordan, but of the death of Yeshua our Savior, God's only begotten Son. Jesus enters the Jordan and is buried under its waters, a symbolic death pointing to the very real death to come. And then, when all seems lost, he is raised again in fulfillment of the covenant made so long ago, in fulfillment of all of God's promises which find their completion only in and through Jesus Christ, in his dying and rising again. This event takes its proper place as part of the grand story of God's covenant victory – the fulfillment of his promises through our Lord Jesus.

It's all there in the Baptism of our Lord: creation, fall, judgment, mercy, liberation, redemption, fulfillment, victory. The part both reflects and illuminates the whole, and the whole both gives meaning to and receives meaning from the part. It is a grand puzzle of grace. And you are a piece of it; in your own baptism you became a piece of the puzzle. The trick, of course, is seeing how it all fits together, and taking your place in God's grand design. May it be so, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.