

Sermon for January 9, 2022—“Now What?”

First Sunday after Epiphany, Baptism of Jesus, Year C—Text: Isa. 43:1-7; Matt.3:7-17

Have you seen the movie “Finding Nemo”? My favorite scene takes place at the very end, right after the credits begin to roll. The main story is over. A clownfish by the name of Nemo, had been taken from his home on the Great Barrier Reef. He ends up in the fish tank of a dentist in Sydney, Australia. And after a harrowing journey across the sea, Nemo is re-united with his father, Marlin. They all live happily ever after. The end. Well, not quite. What do I mean?

Well, even though the main story has ended, we soon discover that another story has just begun. You see the fish who’d helped Nemo escape from the tank had managed to free themselves, too. While their tank is being cleaned, they manage to roll the plastic bags they’re in along the counter, they make it out the window across the street, and into Sydney Harbor. When the last one finally reaches the water, there’s a collective cheer, and sigh of relief. And then the reality of their situation dawns upon them. Bobbing in the ocean, still encased in plastic bags, Bloat, the puffer fish breaks the silence. Two words: “Now what?” Hilarious, right? Now what?

That’s my question this morning. I ask because, as we all probably realize, the great drama of Advent is over. The festivities of Christmas are a fading memory. After a harrowing journey to the manger, Mary and Joseph have welcomed their son into the world. The heavenly host has sung, the shepherds have gone to Bethlehem, saw their Messiah in the manger, and returned to their fields. The Magi have followed the star, paid their respects, left their gifts, and gone home by another way. That’s good stuff. Actually, that’s **great** stuff! In fact, it doesn’t get much better than that.

And therein lies the challenge on this, the second Sunday in January. Now what? What good news remains? What’s left to say today on the other side of Christmas? Think about it. It seems that about this time every year, we all realize something. Something that the holidays let us tuck under the tree for a few weeks. We realize, for all of the Advent and Christmas hullabaloo, that we’re **still** waiting. Waiting for Jesus. We’re still waiting for His kingdom to come. Waiting for His Church to thrive. Waiting for His will to be done.

Here, on the other side of Christmas, we find ourselves—by and large—living in the same old world, with the same old people, struggling with the same old demons. Nothing’s really changed. And so, on the other side of Christmas, we can’t help but wonder: “Now what?”

We’re living somewhere between the holidays, and the “every” days. And if it seems that we’ve been here before—we have—roughly five short weeks ago. Today’s Gospel reading takes us back to the exact same place that the Gospel reading on December 12th did. Once again, we find John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan River, baptizing people. Only five weeks later, and we find ourselves, more or less, right back where we started. Almost as if Christmas never came. And if we’re honest with ourselves, that feels about right, right about now. Yep, here we are, back in the wilderness.

Here we are, back in line, waiting for what John offers: forgiveness for our sins, and a thorough dunking in God’s grace. And, yet, even as we go under again, we know. We know that sooner or later, we’ll be right back, holding our breath, waiting for a miracle. After all—that’s the way it’s always been. That’s the way **we** have always been.

Why should we expect it to be any different this time around? And then Matthew gives us our answer. For although our gospel readings, five weeks apart, are similar—they're not the same. Five weeks ago, the Gospel reading ended with John proclaiming the good news, telling us One more powerful than he is coming; One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, with a winnowing fork in His hand to clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His granary, burning the chaff with unquenchable fire. It ends with us dripping wet—waiting still.

Waiting hopefully perhaps, but waiting nonetheless. But here—on the other side of Christmas, Matthew keeps going. As if on cue, Matthew writes, “Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him.” No sooner is Jesus baptized, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God, descending like a dove, and alighting on him. Then—to top it all off—comes a voice, presumably the voice of God. “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” “Now what?” we ask. “Now Jesus!” says Matthew.

There's a story about a mother at home with her two young children one lazy afternoon. Everything seemed fine, until mom realizes that the house was quiet. Too quiet. And as every parent knows, a quiet house can only mean one thing: the kids are up to no good. She quietly walked into each of their rooms. Not finding them, she began to worry. Then she heard it. The sound of whispering followed by the sound of a flushing toilet. Following the sound, she tiptoes to the bathroom. Whispers, flush. Whispers, flush.

She pokes her head in, and there, standing over the commode, were her children. One holding a dripping wet Barbie doll by the ankles. The other with their finger on the toilet handle. Then she hears, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and in the hole you go.” Flush.

This is supposedly a true story. It's almost too funny **not** to believe. And there's more than just slight ring of truth to it, because this story is, for all intents and purposes, our story. We know what it feels like to have life grab us by the ankles, and dangle us over the waters of chaos. What's more, we know that this happens in **spite** of our faith. We know it happens, more often than not, precisely **because** of our faith.

Don't believe me? Just look at Jesus. Think about it...What was the first thing that happened to him **after** his baptism? The very first thing? The Spirit whisked Jesus away, sends Him out into the very wilderness from which John the Baptist came to be tempted by the devil. In the hole you go! I think that's why Matthew tells Jesus' baptism story the way he does, as an intimate encounter between Jesus and God—Father and Son—not necessarily as a spectacle for all to see and hear. I think Matthew tells it this way because he wants us to know what it meant to **Jesus** before we try to figure out what it means for **us**.

So what **did** it mean for Jesus? Well, it **didn't** mean that the Father would keep him out of trouble. Jesus found that out before he had a chance to dry off! It didn't even mean that things would work out the way he'd planned. No, it seems to me that what Jesus' baptism meant to Him was this: that when He found himself in trouble He would never find himself **alone**. It meant that even when things went badly, Jesus would still have the Father's blessing, and the Spirit's presence.

And here's brothers and sisters—is the thing: Isn't that what Jesus' baptism means to **us**, too? For that matter, isn't that what our own baptisms mean? That we're never alone, even in the most desolate places? Doesn't it mean that because God declared Jesus beloved long before His ministry began, before one miracle took place—that God's love is unconditional? That likewise God's love for us isn't dependent on us, or on anything we do? That God's grace doesn't wash off? That it doesn't depend on our ability to earn it? That anytime we find ourselves in a hole, Jesus—by the power of the Holy Spirit—is right there with us? Yes—that's exactly what it means!!

It's been said that whenever Martin Luther, the father of the Reformation, found himself ready to give up, he would touch his forehead, and say to himself: "Remember Martin—you have been baptized." Here on the other side of Christmas, that's more than just good advice, that's good news. Darn good news!

And so, as we cross this threshold between the divine and the mundane, between the holidays and the "every" days—the "ordinary" days—between the world we hope for and the world we live in, let us remember that **we've** been baptized. And having heard once again the story of the Baptism of our Lord, let us also remember too, that Jesus was not simply baptized, but that He was baptized **with** us. That He was baptized **for** us.

And may the comfort it assuredly gave Jesus through all of his temptations and trials, give us even greater comfort through ours, we who have been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and in the hole he goes.

Now what? Now—let us pray: Gracious God, thank you for this story on the other side of Christmas—a reminder of the Spirit's presence—and for your blessing upon Jesus at his baptism. We thank you for the same in ours. Thank you also, for this gift of a Savior—a baptized Savior. Help us to remember that we have been baptized. Help us to remember that your grace doesn't wash off. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen and amen.

