

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Salt Lake City, Utah

January 11, 2009 – The Baptism of our Lord

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and He separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning – the first day.

Mark 1:7-11

And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Norman Maclean, in the closing line of his novella, *A River Runs Through It*, wrote, "I am haunted by waters." In the novella, Maclean tells the story of two brothers, the sons of a Scotch Presbyterian minister, who grew up fly-fishing on the rivers of western Montana. Their lives were formed and transformed by their experiences on the waters of the Blackfoot River.

I am haunted by waters. That line could be the introduction to the scripture lessons for today. The passage in Genesis describes the Spirit of God hovering over the powerful, chaotic waters of primordial times and bringing forth life. Mark's gospel describes the Spirit of God hovering over the waters of baptism and bringing forth the church, the people of God, the new divine family. The life that God creates through baptism is life in a community; it is a

life in a group of people called to be God's people.

This truth, though, flies in the face of the current reality in America. American popular religion seems to be based on an understanding that religion is only and can only be a strictly private and solitary affair.

Just look at the data. For many years, pollsters have been telling us that Americans are a religious people. More than 90% of our fellow citizens polled say that they believe in God. Yet, less than 50% of us are active in any organized religious group. George Gallup once observed that Americans are more religious than ever, but they just don't care much for churches and religious organizations. Gallup's conclusion was that Americans are believers, but not joiners. Even those who join are not much for being together. In many church groups, it is common for less than 25% of those who are members actually to be in a worship service on any given Sunday.

One thing is certain, people who say they are religious and do not join with others are not following historic Christianity. Our faith is neither merely a set of lofty ideals and noble propositions, nor is it only a personal system of ethics and guides for behavior. Our faith is a corporate endeavor; it is a way of life under Christ together with other followers of the way.

Jesus preached, taught, healed, and acted as an individual, but he also formed a community. He called together twelve followers who were with him for three years. In turn, there were some 300 people in the community of faith at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. By the end of the Day of Pentecost, the family of faith gathered around the teachings of Jesus had mushroomed into a group of 3000 people. And, it continued to expand from there.

Just look at the writings of the Christian scriptures. Paul described the church to the people of Corinth as the body of Christ and the visible presence of Christ on earth. Both of these images speak to the corporate reality of the church.

While Americans may try to hold on to the fallacy of a "self-made religious person" and a "religion as my own private affair," in the act of baptism, we

are reminded that, from beginning to end, our relationship with God and, thus, our identity as a person of faith are corporate in nature. Baptism reminds us that our religion involves the entire body of Christ, the church, from start to finish.

We come to church as individuals, yet we become something more than a collection of individuals. We are drawn together by more than just a vague tolerance for one another. Our unity, our corporate identity, is a gift from God, not an accomplishment of which we can boast. Our unity, our togetherness, is a result of God's grace in our lives. There has to be some divine element involved for such a group of people who comprise the First Congregational Church to come together.

To be together in the church is to be together in God's family, begotten by water and the word. To be in God's family, one does not merely sign on the dotted line; one is adopted and embraced by the rest of the family. We are joined into the family.

We all know that being part of a family is not restricted only to "blood kin." There is a sense of connection to and comfort with each other. Family members are those people who know where the coffee cups are in the kitchen and can help themselves. They are the ones who gather with you in the kitchen to talk. They know about the special days of the family and help celebrate. To be family means you are there for one another through thick and thin and for better and worse. True family is involved with one another even at times when they don't have to be.

In family, there is a special sharing bond formed. You share the times of trouble with one another, and, because you share them, the troubles are not as bad. You share the times of struggle with one another, and, because you share them, you have a sense of hope even in the midst of struggle. You share the times of joy with one another, and, because you share them, the joys are made even sweeter.

In baptism, God has adopted us as God's own and does not kick us out of the

family even when we disobey. God reaches out for us and searches for us until we are found. God heals our brokenness. Once we are adopted into the family, God does not let us go easily.

That brings us to another aspect of being in the family – our chores. The church bears responsibility to go and make disciples. We are the ones who are to proclaim God’s love for the world so that others may know. We are to share the stories of our family of faith with others. We have been gifted with God’s grace, and we, in turn, are to give that gift to others. All of our efforts are part of our continuing baptism work. It is all part of creating family.

We are haunted by the waters of our baptism because they make us into a family of faith together. The act of baptism has created a family, and our own baptism has made us part of it, in which we grow in our relationship with God. Dear people of faith, it is the power of the water in the symbolism of baptism that transforms us. AMEN.