Sermon on the Baptism of the Lord
Samantha and Taya (Year C Texts)

I couldn’t believe how hot it was; dust was swirling and the group I was walking with was going at a snail’s pace to allow for some of those less in shape to keep up; all around for as far as the eye could see was wilderness: rock cliffs and flat plateaus; I couldn’t see a single scrub brush let alone a tree. Where could I find some shade?

When I was a kid, I lived in South America for two years and when I was there my mother claimed I suffered “sunstroke,” by which I don’t think she meant actual heat stroke, a life threatening illness, but quite a few bouts of heat exhaustion.

Ever since that time I’ve always payed for prolonged exposure to the sun, though I do love it; so all I could think about, trudging along was “I need shade!”

And then our guide stopped us, “we’re here,” he cheerfully announced. “We’re here?” I wondered. “We’re nowhere!” I inwardly seethed.

And then he pointed to it, a narrow opening in the cliff wall, literally 3 to 4 feet wide. “We go through there,” he said.

And we did, and as we did we entered a new world. The first things I noticed, I’m sure everyone did, was the cool air, it was at least 5 degrees cooler, the second thing was the deep glorious shade, made possible not only by rocks on either side but by trees and shrubs, green when all we had experienced were the ongoing shades of beige overlaying this trackless desert.

And then I heard it! Gurgling softly in the background, water! It was water that made this hidden paradise possible, this oasis from the unforgiving heat, even safety from danger, as it had done 3000 years ago when young David had fled from Saul, for indeed we had entered the stronghold of Engedi, on the western shores of the Dead sea, a labyrinth of paths, wadis and oases famous in Israelite history.

I thought about this experience, which happened 30 years ago, as I wondered what it’s like for all of us at the beginning of 2016; what it’s like for Samantha and Taya as they give themselves to Christ this morning in our primal sacrament.

I thought about how baptism is very much like the water at Engedi, or might I say, like the interaction of the wilderness and water in and around Engedi; how the water changes what is barren, forbidding and uninhabitable into a place of refuge and provision, but not just that, a place from which we can re-enter those places and relationships in our lives that are not so easy, not so much an oasis.

We live in a time when only the oldest liturgical churches in the world celebrate the Baptism of the Lord as a feast day and even we don’t do it with much gusto.

We remind ourselves that of a time, in the first few centuries, when this feast was indeed more important than our Lord’s Nativity.

*As an aside, and for those of you who might be interested, each Sunday is assigned what’s called a set of Propers: it’s the readings, the Collect and some recommendations for those planning the liturgy. It is this feast that gets the honor of being called Proper 1.*

It does because in his baptism Jesus not only entered into our humanity, awesome and world-changing though that is, but he entered the very process of conversion and change that is required of each of us if we are to live as those who experience and reflect God’s life, which is God’s will for us.

Even if we agree with the scriptural assessment that Jesus lived without overt or willful sin, something I’m not afraid of affirming, in his baptism he, and therefore God, was demonstrating a clear willingness to enter the reality of our chaos, our sin and make the same commitment to ongoing change—that’s what we call repentance—that you and I are called to embrace!

And, in fact, not only does this event bring a change of mind and direction to Jesus, launching him in his ministry; at different points in the gospels Jesus is pictured as learning, changing and growing in his understanding of his mission.

What about you? As you think about 2016, as you think about your life, where do you feel the nudge of God’s Holy Spirit asking you to change?

In a minute we’ll be saying our baptismal covenant together. Each of the questions provides an opportunity to take a journey that can lead you into wonderful life-changing practices, insights and attitudes.

You could take your bulletin home and this afternoon and strike while the fire is hot; read each of the commitments carefully and ask God for insight into them for yourself! It could be amazing what happens!

But it doesn’t start with you; it starts with gift. The wilderness around Engedi did nothing to “deserve the water it has;” rather the over 900 species of plants that populate this world heritage site are made possible by two springs that emerge, seemingly, out of impossibility, out of solid rock!

Sometimes it feels like that in our lives doesn’t it? Where in this wilderness of broken dreams, promises and disappointment can new life arise?

But that’s the miracle of God’s Love, the Presence of Christ at our sacraments and in each other; where God is present, life is possible, new spiritual life, a change from sinful habits, from selfishness, from fear that things will continue to fall apart!

It is the gift of God’s Love and our yes to it that provides all the nourishment that we need for the journey of a lifetime.

This gift is available to all. There is not one person here who is inevitably tied to their sin or their guilt. Some psychologists say that we’re finished with guilt and have moved on to self-hatred an even deadlier plague that explains our skyrocketing suicide rates and the level of despair in our society.

In the face of our societal self-hatred the great commandment of Jesus becomes even more important, learning to love our neighbours *as ourselves* but we can only do that if our baptismal identity is secure. And so, as hard as it is for some of us, there is not one of us here today who cannot once again hear what Jesus heard “You are my beloved child in you I am well pleased!”

God’s active love and acceptance is the spring of water that can make any rejection, any wilderness patch in our lives, a place where new things can grow!

We have a wonderful liturgy in the Anglican Church that can help us re-connect with this great gift, it’s called the Rite of Reconciliation and if you’re interested just chat with me after the service and I’d be happy to arrange a time with you.

At the beginning of every year we are faced with the Dickensenian dilemma, it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. There’s good and evil in our society and there’s a line dividing good and evil that runs through each of our hearts.

How wonderful, how hopeful then, to start our this new year with the recognition that Christ has walked the path of change ahead of us and that he remains here, in his resurrected presence to fill us and call us and help us on our journey.

Samantha and Taya, this promise is especially for you today and it’s for all who will take it up again. We’re here, let’s walk through the opening!