Sermon on the Baptism of the Lord
(Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17)

My own baptism, unlike the scenes played out in our readings today, wasn’t very dramatic; it happened on November 4th, 1979 when I was 15 years old.

An historical side note, showing how even though so many things change but some stay the same: it was the same day the American Embassy was overrun by Iranian militants in Tehran, beginning the war between those two countries that is still playing out in terrifying ways.

Not only was my own baptism not dramatic as the biblical stories or the historical events that happened to fall on the same day, it was ambiguous.

In the tradition I grew up in, we practiced “believer’s baptism,” that is, baptism after one was mature enough to say, “I’m choosing to identify as a follower of Jesus Christ and I’m confessing that publically by getting baptized.”

Church’s that practice in this way are putting the emphasis on the person’s decision which is fine but it avoids the conditioning influences that underlie our so-called “personal decisions;” in my case these influences were not altogether happy ones.

I’ve told the story in other places, but to put it mildly, I was wary of God as a teenager, but even so—with the benefit of hindsight I see—the pressure to fit in, to not rock the boat, to please my parents, led me to say “yes to baptism.”

I want to immediately add that such an admission does not delegitimize my baptism.

The only thing that is delegitimized is the Western myth of individualism that we “freely choose” our path somehow, outside of a social context; that we somehow choose without ambiguous motives, or with full intellectual clarity: that’s the real myth!

After I was baptized I was supposed to be settled in my beliefs, having made, as it were, my mature decision. But, it turns out my own adventure with the Divine was only beginning!

Of course, now that seems obvious, even if baptism is something we undergo; it is, in the main it is far more God’s promissory note of development than a bill of sale after a completed purchase.

it’s my experience as a pastor that often we think of the sacraments as a kind of endpoint: baptism as a kind of protection; the Eucharist as a kind of religious ritual meant to rein in our desire: here you go, we’ll give you the weight-watcher’s Jesus, just a munch and a sip, it will satiate your other “appetites!”

But what if we imagine the waters of baptism and by extension the Eucharist, not as rituals of conformism or safety but as a fresh exposure to being alive?

When we think of the physical element in baptism, water, we are at the very foundation of all life, from the watery chaos life arises, whether in Genesis or, according to biological theory, in the depths of the oceans thermal vents.

Water is so crucial to life because it flows in most earth-like temperatures; it has the capacity to ferry substances between a cell and its environment and because it’s so plentiful on our planet, life is able to thrive in such variety and in so many places.

So the fact that we tie water to the promise of God is saying something like: it is God’s presence given to us in Christ and the Holy Spirit that connects the finite conditions of our lives, rooted as they are in our social context, to the infinite resources of the Divine Life

It is the abundance of God’s water, if you will, that carries to our lives the Love, Grace, Forgiveness, Power, that we need to deal with our ambiguous decisions, that we need to deal with our poor decisions, and even helps us keep an even keel in our good ones.

Is this not what is playing out in our gospel text today and in our reading from Acts?

When Jesus comes to the prophet John on the fringes of Israelite society and asks John to baptize him, he is signaling that he is at the beginning of something; at this stage he has inklings but the path in front of him is murky.

At the same time he is rooted in his Jewish heritage, a heritage that needs renewal; thus joining himself with John’s movement that emphasizes the need to look at our lives from God’s perspective makes sense.

“I too am changing my mind, joining God’s work in and through this raggedy prophet.” When John protests, Jesus says, “let it be so now; for it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

I’ve tried to explain this incredibly important word “righteousness” in the past: bringing about justice in God’s loving way.

By saying “fulfill all righteousness,” Jesus is saying that his action is a kind of grand portal by which and through which all the necessary and varied ways this “loving justice” can and will be worked out.

The right way to announce my messiahship, Jesus is saying, is to join myself to my context, to get baptized by a prophet who is announcing that things can’t stay as they are and that God is here to help all of us engage with our culture, our heritage differently.

What a message for us who are part of the church! Even if we’re long term members of this congregation, the game is afoot! Maintaining our status quo is not the aim of God; fulfilling all righteousness is!

If Jesus refuses to be “the King who drops in from God” but “becomes the King by emerging from his particular culture,” then you and I cannot become the people we are meant to be without engaging with God right where we are, by owning what we are a part of and working for its renewal.

Cornelius is our model: what will it mean for him to begin his journey of baptism as a centurion, a dread centurion, one of the leaders of Caesar’s shock troops; the ones who organized crucifixions, who quelled riots by force, who made sure taxes, however unfair, were collected?

What does it mean for *him* to be Jesus’ follower? The way is murky; it will involve a wilderness of doubt, of trial and error, of love, forgiveness and certainly change-of-perspective.

All this is also true for us! One of the wonders of life is that somehow we are immune from this journey. But I’m well aware that one of the beauties of being part of a post-christendom reality is that more and more of us are waking up to the fact that we feel we’re at the beginning again; certainty is out the window as we try to feel our way forward into God’s future.

And yet the grand good news is that all that was promised to Jesus in his baptism: a new identity, the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, the ability to renew our thinking is available to him and is available to us!

Life is too short to not identify with the life-giving changes brought to us in Jesus Christ. I urge you to join this movement; to either start this journey or begin it again. As Cornelius discovered, there’s no condition of life, no choices that have been previously made that puts us outside of God’s invitation.

Perhaps you are being drawn to baptism yourself or to renewing your baptismal vows? If you are, please drop me an email or a text or a phone call. I’d love to chat with you about it over a coffee. Amen.