

Epiphany 1B, 2018
Church of the Holy Trinity, Middletown CT

Well, if you were reading along in your bulletin just now, you may have thought that Deacon Pat had gotten carried away and read farther than she should have in the Gospel reading this morning. The fact is that I put her up to it. Sometimes our lectionary readings separate the stories of the Bible into little chunks in ways that take away the context of what we are reading. In this case, the lectionary cut off the evidence that the story of Jesus' baptism begins and ends in the wilderness. John the Baptist was the one, Mark tells us, who was the voice crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." John the baptizer "appeared in the wilderness." So Jesus went out to the wilderness by the Jordan River to be baptized by John. But no sooner did Jesus receive the Holy Spirit and hear the word that he was God's Son, the Beloved, than he was driven even further into the wilderness.

I think it is safe to say that most of us think of Baptism as something that is meant to bring us **out of** the wilderness, in much the same way that God's word at creation made order out of the chaos. As Christians, we believe that Baptism calls each of us into the vocation of Christian life. At Baptism we acknowledge that God has given us a particular ministry, a unique part in the whole plan for the salvation of the world. Therefore, Baptism is a community rite because the calling of each person has an effect upon the whole Body of Christ. All the witnesses at a Baptism promise to aid the newly baptized one in his or her growth process. We agree to help make sure that this new member of our community learns the story of God's people, is brought into relationship with God, and has the opportunity to discover his or her unique ministry.

Baptism is therefore the beginning of a journey, rather than an ending. In Baptism our direction is indicated, rather than our arrival. So, I think we should not be surprised that Jesus' baptism led him straight back into the wilderness, rather than rescuing him from it. Although Jesus, as God's Son, might well have been exempted from the human growth process, the temptations, the

wilderness, life with the wild beasts, he was not. That is part of the miracle of Incarnation: that God chose to be fully human in Jesus, rather than skipping some of the more uncomfortable steps. I was reminded of this when I once heard a colleague preaching at an Epiphany service. He wondered why Jesus came into the world as a baby, rather than as an adult. Then he explained the reason: because God chose to completely identify with all the parts of our human life—from beginning to end. From stable to cross. From manger to grave. In Jesus' journey, God sanctified all parts of human existence, giving meaning to resurrection.

The Baptismal life is a journey...and yet we do not necessarily have to leave town. In the Native American tradition, the Coyote is a trickster. The Coyote comes into our lives and tricks us in ways that are sometimes funny and sometimes painful in order for us to learn a lesson. In one Coyote story a man had a dream or a vision that there was a place where everything is perfect. You might say that this place was heaven. He had been told that this place was visible to all who had accepted a life of humility and complete service to their community. The man felt very humble, especially since he had no real possessions, but he felt that he must go on a journey away from his present life and community in search of this perfect place.

So, he set out the very next day at dawn. He walked and walked the entire day, and when evening arrived, before he had found the perfect place, he set up camp, took out his meager meal of bread and a flask of water to satisfy his hunger and thirst. He gave thanks, ate the bread, drank the water, and then he removed his sandals and placed them facing in the direction he was headed so he could continue his journey the next day. Then he went to sleep. While he slept, Coyote came and turned the man's shoes around so that they faced the direction from which the man had come that day. When he awoke, he put on his shoes, and began to walk again. While he walked all day, he thought about this perfect place, this heavenly city. When it was nearly dark, he came to a place that looked strangely familiar. He walked down a street, turned a corner, and saw a somewhat familiar dwelling. As he stood outside the dwelling, its inhabitants came out to greet him and invite him in. When they

did, he entered and was given warm clothes and a warm meal that was so delicious he could not remember the last time he had eaten so well. He was received with such hospitality that he felt as though he was a member of a family he had known his whole life.

After much talk, singing, and praying, the whole household offered the man their best bedding. He thanked them and laid himself down to sleep, thanking Creator God for the abundant blessings shared with him. He could not help but think that this was, indeed, a perfect place, a heavenly place. How could there be another more perfect?

This story resembles our journey into baptized life. Baptism is our glimpse into the Kingdom of God, yet we are called to live it out right here and now. We don't have to leave home. Jesus was in the wilderness, was baptized, and then was immediately driven out into the wilderness again. Baptism did not rescue him from the place where he found himself. He was called to bring the Kingdom of God to that very place. And so it is for us, sometimes. If we thought that our Christian faith was going to rescue us from ever having wilderness experiences, we were wrong. If we thought that we had to travel far away from who and where we are to fulfill our call to be the people of God, we were mistaken. If we thought that heaven is only something that can happen after death, we misunderstood.

Wherever Jesus is found, there the Kingdom of Heaven is. We are baptized with the Holy Spirit into a new and growing awareness, a new appreciation and comprehension of creation as an ongoing process in and around us. God is still at work creating and renewing all parts of the world...even the wilderness. Jesus has promised to be our constant companion, our native guide, to bring each of us into the fulfillment of our own little piece of God's plan, to see that each of us grows into the full personhood which is our birthright as beloved children of God. Today as we renew our Baptismal Vows (BCP Page 292), I challenge you to think about where you are being called to fulfill them in your life here and now.

The Rev. Dana L. Campbell, Interim Rector