

Good morning.

Today being January 12th 2020, I wonder how the new year is finding you. How are your New Year's resolutions going so far?

Some of us may roll our eyes at the idea of New Year's resolutions, but I can imagine that many of us do indeed have some kind of idea of what they want out of the year of 2020.

Perhaps it's some kind of new dedication to taking care of our health, or getting started on some kind of new venture or hobby or business opportunity.

In my corner of the world, I see people moving from one community to another, preparing for a graduation or a new job. Some people are making massive changes in their lifestyles with new careers, or even struggling to redefine their own identity.

Many of us are stepping through the threshold of last years memories, victories and disappointments, and coming out on the other side to the unknown landscape of a new year.

A new year can be just another year, but it can also be an opportunity for a fresh start into something new. A new year can give us the feeling of putting an older self aside for a new identity, and the journey to get there.

That journey into a new year can be exciting and full of promise, and yet it can also be one of fear and uncertainty.

Thankfully, Jesus is gracefully present with us on that journey, as we learn in our Gospel today.

Our Gospel today brings us into a fresh start in the life of Jesus.

In the timeline since we last heard from Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, we have not heard about what happened to Jesus for more than 2 decades of his life.

Matthew's Gospel begins with the story of Jesus being born in Bethlehem from a situation heavily burdened with complexity.

From the moment of his birth, Jesus's life is filled with very human problems like scandal, a jealous king who desired to murder him, running away to Egypt to avoid genocide, and any number of other daily problems from living at that time in the Roman Empire.

When we finally hear about Jesus again, he's a 30 year old man, he's traveled around 60 miles to meet his cousin John the Baptist, and he's asking to be baptized.

To understand the significance of what Jesus is requesting, we have to understand what baptism is. In those days, baptism was a sign of repentance, or a turning around.

As people were immersed in water, it was as if their old selves were drowned in the water, and when they sprang up, they had a new life, a new identity.

With each person that enters the waters of the Jordan River, a new person with a new identity is reborn.

Each person is adopted into God's family, and sin is washed away in God's grace.

The question that comes to my mind when hearing this story is "Why does Jesus need to be baptized?" John the Baptist also questioned this.

I think we all tend to look at Jesus somewhat 2 dimensionally at times, and we forget that the story of Jesus is not just a story of the Son of God exercising his divine will into the world, but also the story of God taking on all the aspects of living as a human being.

Somewhere in the decades of Jesus's life that are unaccounted for in our gospels, Jesus realizes that his life is not meant to stay at home in Nazareth.

Jesus felt the need that many people feel, a call to obey God's will and change his life.

While Jesus is fully God; eternal, immutable, and unchanging; Jesus is also very much a human being, and it's very much within human nature to change.

Human beings yearn for change, for purpose, and for a sense of identity. Jesus is on that same path in this story, from the moment he leaves his home, and even after his death and resurrection.

Jesus is not satisfied with the present situation of his life or the lives of the people around him, and he is coming to enact change on a personal level and beyond.

Jesus is making a commitment to change, and becoming an agent of change. For Jesus, this change meant following the call of God into the beginning of his ministry.

When we are baptized, we are making that same commitment to a new identity. We are delivered from the chaos of sin and death, and clothed in a new identity in Christ.

In the moment when Jesus is baptized, his identity is declared from the heavens by God. “This is my Son, the Beloved, with who I am well pleased.”

In baptism we are a new creation, a beloved child of God, and this is good and pleasing to God. It reminds me of the phrase 'A new year, a new me.' But this change, this new me, is not just a one time event. Baptism goes on and on every day. I like to explain it this way, 'it's not that you were baptized, you are baptized.'

It's not a one time event, but rather an all-time event.

So it's day 12 of 2020 now, so how are those resolutions going for you? Are your resolutions all working out the way you thought?

For many of us baptism is something that happened to us many years ago, perhaps too long ago to remember, but are you feeling that enlightenment of a new identity in Christ? Are you still feeling optimistic about 2020?

I think for many of us, a New Year's resolution is ultimately met with unforeseen challenges that might halt the progress of that trip to the gym, or that new opportunity that never quite worked out like you planned.

We can easily get sidetracked by unexpected trips to the mechanic or to the hospital. Sometimes that job interview yields no results, or plans get cancelled.

Life can be cruel and indifferent to our plans.

Perhaps you were just so ready to get to that new exercise plan, then as the psalmist writes “the voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees” and you're down with cedar fever.

A new year can bring feelings of optimism and hope, but that can be stifled quickly by disappointment, frustration, or loss of direction. In the same way, our baptism is no guarantee of an easy life.

As a matter of fact, commitment to the will of God can almost guarantee some kind of frustration or obstacles along the way.

I think what draws me into this story the most is not just the fact that Jesus is baptized, but rather what I know will happen immediately afterwards.

Jesus has this mountaintop moment from his baptism where everyone around him bears witness to his identity and hears the voice of God announcing "this is my son", and in that moment he seems unstoppable.

He's surrounded by witnesses in awe, side by side with John the Baptist heralding his coming. The very heavens are opening to honor him, and he is filled with the Holy Spirit and a newfound strength to begin his ministry.

But then immediately after this amazing moment, he is sent by the same Holy Spirit into the desert to be tempted by Satan.

He is driven out alone, with no one to offer him support or guidance, except for an adversary who tries anything to break his resolve.

He is without food or water for many days, and is famished, his strength put to the test. His adversary questions him over and over with, "If you really are the Son of God..."

Even after such a beautiful mountaintop experience has marked the beginning of a new ministry and a new life for Jesus, life will not get any easier for him.

Jesus will be tried and tested, physically, spiritually, emotionally. Jesus will be forced to consider "Am I who I think I am?"

That new year, new me 2020 vision of ourselves is doomed to be met with challenges. In the same way, our identity in our baptism is met with challenge and frustration.

So what is the good news here?

The good news is that our identity in baptism does not change, and we are not alone. While we don't know what circumstances will meet us on the road in 2020, we do know that we will still be children of God, and Jesus will be side by side with us on that journey.

Baptism isn't a promise of a worry-free easy life but it does offer us a promise of eternal hope regardless of our circumstances.

God doesn't promise us that life will be painless or without frustration, free of fear, anger, or shame, but baptism is the promise that those circumstances do not define us.

In the highs and lows of life, baptism offers us equanimity, a spiritual ark in the floods of chaos and fear.

A promise that even in the valleys of the shadow of death, we have the salvation of eternal life with God, starting here and now on earth.

Even when we have to take that long walk carrying burdens that others cannot see, Jesus is walking beside us on that journey.

In the chaos of an ever changing world, our baptism is the promise that God's unconditional love for us will never change.

In the moments we are surrounded by loved ones, we can find strength knowing that God has chosen us and called us into an eternal identity in baptism.

In the same way, when we hit the potholes of life, and our journey seems like an endlessly complex puzzle we can never fully solve, we are nonetheless chosen and rooted in that same eternal identity in the waters of baptism.

So if you're in the mountaintop spiritual moment, full of purpose and clarity, remember you are a loved child of God, and that will always be your identity.

And if you're in the valley of a spiritual low, where your vision is hazy and unclear and the obstacles you're facing are overwhelming, remember you are a loved child of God and that will always be your identity.

Amen.