

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA**

January 10, 2021 — EPIPHANY 1, YR. B — THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*New Year—New Life!*”

Genesis 1:1-15	(God’s creates heaven and earth, light and dark, day and night)
Psalms 29	(Ascribe to the Lord the glory of His name; worship Him in the beauty of holiness)
Acts 19:1-7	(Believers repent and are baptized into the Name of the Lord Jesus)
St. Mark 1:4-11	(God declares Jesus His Son, at His baptism)

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On January 2, 2006, in Tallmansville, West Virginia, an explosion rocked the Sago Mine. Initial reports stated that one man had been found dead, and 12 others were trapped. When, in reality, only one had been found alive, and the rest had died. The false report claiming that 12 men were alive was given to family members who had gathered at a local church. Later, it was discovered that the miners who perished in the accident had been alive for many hours before they died, and had written notes to their families.<sup>1</sup>

In one of the first notes released to the public, along with expressing love for his family, one miner had written “not so bad, just going to sleep,” and “see you on the other side.” How amazingly peaceful was this note! “Don’t worry about me, dying’s not so bad, I’m not suffering.” Here, this man expressed his faith that Jesus Christ has already made a way for his loved-ones to see him on the other side.<sup>2</sup>

If you knew that you only had a short time to live, what would you write in a note? It is my fervent prayer that you would be able to say with confidence, “See you soon.” The truth is, we all have a limited time left on this earth. Every one of us is “terminal.” As soon as we’re born, we start dying, and because of sin, we come into the world separated from God, and from eternal life with Him. But thanks be to God, Jesus has made a way for us to be with God forever, and this is what we affirm in Holy Baptism. Let us look at what today’s Gospel has to say to us about Jesus’ Baptism:

We start by encountering the prophet John, out in the desert, preaching repentance and baptism for the remission of sins (Mk. 1:4). From this we can learn that in the wilderness of life, all of us stand in need of repentance and redemption.

In Mark’s gospel, the wilderness is depicted as a place of testing and temptation. It was thought that evil spirits lurked there. In fact, we see that immediately after Jesus’ baptism Our Lord goes into the wilderness, where the devil does tempt Him. From this we can learn that even baptized, faithful Christians are vulnerable to temptation. And, like Jesus, when we are enticed by sin—that is, we are tempted to cheat, lie, gossip, act out of materialistic greed, enmity and hard-heartedness, selfishness, or even despair and self-hatred—we are to fight sin’s lure with Scripture, faith, and prayer.

John went about preaching “repent and be baptized!” and then, here comes Jesus, asking for this baptism of repentance. Jesus comes to be baptized, but what did He have to repent of? Not *His* sins, but ours! In Second Corinthians 5:21 (NLT), we read: “God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.” It is Jesus who makes the sacrament of Baptism effective, as He Himself is the very means through which forgiveness of sins will come. In other words, Jesus’ baptism is a statement of what He will do for us. And our baptism is a statement of what He has done for us.

The fullness of the promise of Christ is not merely cleansing us of our sins, but newness of life in its entirety. How God works is described in Ezekiel 36:25-27 (CEV).

There He declares: “I will sprinkle you with clean water, and you will be clean and acceptable to me. I will wash away everything that makes you unclean, and I will remove your disgusting idols. I will take away your stubborn heart and give you a new heart and a desire to be faithful. You will have only pure thoughts, because I will put my Spirit in you and make you eager to obey my laws and teachings.”

Through Jesus’ saving death on the Cross, our sins are forgiven and we are made new creations in Christ. Holy Baptism represents the work of redemption that Christ has done on our behalf, and we receive that work through faith. But it does not stop at wiping the slate clean. Christ’s saving ministry continues to unfold within us as we seek to live lives of holiness and humility.

John preached repentance, but a person can only repent as a result of a change in his or her own heart. Repentance is not something we decide to do. Only God can motivate us to genuinely regret things we have thought, said, and done—or failed to do. True repentance involves both sorrow over our sins and a turning away from them. All of us are sorry when we get caught. Not going that way again is what makes the difference.

There at the River Jordan, as the Spirit of God was moving, many came to be baptized. Some truly repented and wanted to lead a new life. Others just yearned to be where the action was. They had no sincere desire to change; they only wanted to do what everyone else was doing. Do we, also, just go through the motions when we come to church, or as we live our daily lives in a supposedly Christian way? John called the hypocrites of his time “vipers.” What if he had gone ahead and baptized them? Would the act of baptism have saved them apart from true faith, or real repentance? No. Is Baptism a ticket to heaven? No. I could baptize my cat and she would not be a Christian (she’d just be fighting mad!). Let us be careful that we do not rely on our simply having been baptized, or being a church member. Neither of those will get us into heaven. Only faith in Christ will save us. If baptism alone were sufficient to salvation, we would be chasing people down and baptizing them against their will. (Unfortunately, that was actually done in one unhappy phase of Christian history.)

Rather, in the wide scope of Christian life, some persons repent of their sins, accept Christ as their Lord and Savior, are born again, and then baptized. Others are baptized as infants, and when they are old enough to understand repentance and profess their faith in Christ, they are born again and confirmed. Either way, some church members still just go through the motions, without ever truly believing that Jesus died for their sins, without ever being born anew.<sup>3</sup>

When Nicodemus asks Jesus what he must do to be saved (Jn. 3:5 ESV), Jesus answers: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” And two verses later, Jesus repeats: “You must be born again.” This is how we become Christians, how we enter into church membership, and ultimately, how we get to heaven: We must be reborn through water (that is, Baptism), and the Spirit (that is, faith). And this is why the Bible says: “if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor. 5:17 NIV).

A new year is upon us. It’s the perfect time for new beginnings. Many will make new year’s resolutions that will be quickly broken. How much more important would it be for us to take seriously our baptismal vows, and the new life that can be ours in Christ Jesus, through faith in His saving birth, death, and resurrection. This baby that we celebrated at Christmas is the Savior who washes away our sins. It is He alone who brings change and newness of life to all who believe in him. May God give each of us grace to have this faith—and even more, to share it boldly with others. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> “Sago Mine Disaster,” [Wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sago_Mine_disaster) <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sago\\_Mine\\_disaster](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sago_Mine_disaster)> January 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. Paul G. Humphrey, “The Baptism of the Lord,” [SermonCentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-baptism-of-the-lord-paul-humphrey-sermon-on-baptism-87123.asp), Jan. 2006 <<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-baptism-of-the-lord-paul-humphrey-sermon-on-baptism-87123.asp>> 4 January 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Adapt. Humphrey, *op. cit.*