

Year A, Epiphany 1 – The Baptism of our Lord  
Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17  
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
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### **Justice: The Fulfillment of Righteousness**

Today, we're celebrating the feast of the Baptism of our Lord. I don't know about you, but for me, this feast has always been a little puzzling. It's not a question of whether this event happened – Matthew, Mark, and Luke all describe the scene we heard in the Gospel reading today. Clearly, Jesus was baptized by John in the River Jordan. The question is, why?

There are several different things that go on in the sacrament of baptism, several different things that God is accomplishing with us. In that water of life, God makes us into new creations by washing us of our sinfulness, and by adopting us as God's own children, and by making us part of Christ's body in the world. God invites us into that water for a symbolic drowning, that we might die to our own selves and be raised to a new life in Christ, revealing the rule and power of God to the world around us.

That's great stuff and certainly worthy of celebration. But the question remains, why did *Jesus* need to do it? He was already free of sin; he was already God's own child; he already embodied the presence of God in the world; and he would experience his own literal death and resurrection. There must have been something else going on here because Jesus certainly didn't need the same things from baptism that we need.

Well, Matthew's gospel gives us an explanation, though it's a little cryptic. John the Baptist says that he thinks Jesus should be baptizing him, not vice versa. And Jesus explains to him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15). So, that clears it up, right? Not so much – unless we look at what it might mean to "fulfill all righteousness."

We tend to think about righteousness as doing godly things, being able to tick off the items on God's checklist for a holy life. But the real meaning of "righteousness" has less to do with a spiritual report card and more to do with the character of our lives in a bigger sense. Righteousness means being in right relationship with God, aligning our lives with what God desires for us. All those things that happen to us in baptism – being cleansed of our sinfulness, being adopted as God's children, becoming part of Christ's body in the world – all these things are components of what it means to be in right relationship with God.

So Jesus says his baptism will "*fulfill* all righteousness." In other words, the new life that he will embody when he rises out of the water will be the epitome of a human life lived in right relationship with God. And in the story we heard this morning, God blesses and affirms this relationship by pouring out the Holy Spirit on Jesus and proclaiming, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased" (Matt 3:17).

But what does that kind of life look like? What would the people around Jesus have seen when they looked to his ultimate model of a right relationship with God?

Well, Jesus himself describes it. He says, over and over again in Scripture, that he has come to reveal God's power and God's rule to a world that most often chooses to live by its own power and its own rules instead. When he announces in his hometown synagogue that he is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of salvation, the words he had just read out loud were these: that

God had anointed him to “bring good news to the poor, ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). Then, later, when John the Baptist’s disciples come to Jesus and ask whether he’s the real deal, the true messiah, Jesus says to them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matt 11:4-5). The one who fulfills what it means to be in right relationship with God is the one who brings about God’s justice in the world. As we heard in the reading from Isaiah this morning, “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights: I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations” (42:1).

But what does that look like in *our* world? If we were looking for examples of what it means to live in relationship with God in the way that Jesus modeled it, what would we see? How do we “bring forth justice to the nations”?

To recognize God’s justice, we first have to recognize its absence. As many of you know, last weekend I returned from a mission trip to Haiti along with George and Carolyn Kroh, Ann Renne, and members of her family. So I have Haiti on my mind. And when you look for a place where God’s justice goes unfulfilled, you don’t have to look much further than Haiti. Just a few examples will make the point.

For us, in our world, when we want some water, we simply go to the sink and turn on the tap. For the people whose homes we visited in Haiti, when they want water, they most often go to a stream or an irrigation canal with a dirty plastic jug and haul the water home – water in which the livestock have been wading, water in which their neighbors have been bathing and washing their clothes. It is contrary to God’s justice that simply drinking that water puts these people at risk.

Another example: medical care. When we need treatment or medication, for the most part we simply go get it. It’s expensive, but it’s there when we need it. For the vast majority of the people in Haiti, care is not available; and if it is, they can’t afford it. We met a woman at the hospital in Les Cayes who I think was in liver failure. She had put together enough money to see a doctor, and several medications had been prescribed. But buying those drugs cost her the equivalent of more than a month’s pay for an average Haitian. And it took us going to seven different pharmacies even to *find* the drugs she needed. It is contrary to God’s justice that what is routine care 200 miles away in Miami is unavailable to a child of God in Haiti.

A final example: education. When we send our children to school, we worry about whether they will get a good enough education to get into the best universities. For the vast majority of the people in Haiti, *elementary school* is a luxury too expensive to afford. The parents need the kids at home to help support the family, and they don’t have the cash for tuition; there is no functional system of public education there. But education is the one thing that could make the difference in whether a child will be able to find a job and move out of the cycle of subsistence living. It is contrary to God’s justice that they are trapped in this life when the tool for overcoming it – basic education – is so easily available to so many others.

All that may sound awfully depressing. Seen with the eyes of the world, it might lead us to despair. But when we look at a situation like Haiti as people empowered by the Holy Spirit in baptism, we can also see examples of those who are “fulfilling all righteousness,” revealing God’s reign by bringing justice into this world of inequality.

For example, about safe drinking water: A couple of months ago, one of you came up to me and asked what it would take to do something about the lack of clean water in Haiti. Five

thousand dollars later, he and his wife had made it possible for a well to be dug, giving one entire community access to safe water. *That's God's justice.*

About access to medical care: This is what Maison de Naissance is all about. This birthing center we help support is bringing high-quality care to some of the poorest mothers and babies in the world – even taking that care into their own *homes*, as our group did when we visited two weeks ago. *That's God's justice.*

About access to education: This is why we support our partner congregation's school in Maniche, Haiti. Over the last few weeks, with our Advent fundraiser in the Jewell Room and the Christmas offering, you gave \$13,000 for the school at Maniche – more than ever before. With that, literally hundreds of students will receive the one thing that offers them a way out of their poverty – a decent education. *That's God's justice.*

And what does all that have to do with baptism? The connection is as clear as the water of life itself. When we come through that water, we join with Jesus in a life of right relationship with God. And a major part of what that means is captured in two promises we will make in just a few minutes. When we renew our baptismal covenant, we will promise to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.” And then we will promise to “strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being.” As baptized people, as those who follow Jesus' model of right relationship with God, *we* make God's reign shine forth in the world. When the world looks to us, it sees something more than hand-wringing and despair at the plight of the poor. When the world looks to us, it sees that “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matt 11:4-5).

May we live fully as people who have come through those waters of new life. May we live fully as the emblems of God's reign in the world. May we hear the voice of God whispering to each one of us, saying, “*You* are my child, my beloved, with whom I am well-pleased.”