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### Finding Salvation in Solidarity

At the age of about nine, I attended a more evangelical Christian camp. Being a cradle Episcopalian this was quite the religious culture shock for me. As I spent five weeks completely immersed in various songs, skits, and testimonies centered around God's love, Jesus, and SALVATION. Which according to my camp counselor was only accessible through a specific prayer in which I invited Jesus into my heart. While I knew I had been baptized as an infant, and was under the impression that my salvation was already a "done deal". I was now being presented with this idea, that somehow, despite my experience of the Holy Spirit in the waters of baptism, the seal and promise of God's love through anointing with oil, and my acceptance into the body of Christ as the congregation exclaimed "we welcome you", it wasn't enough. Somehow (as my counselor argued) I had not yet truly been "saved?!"

Today, on this first Sunday in our short, but wondrous season, of Epiphany we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. As we hear, "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The baptism of Jesus, according to our Gospel from Luke, marks the beginning of his public ministry. Which, if you think about it, is quite remarkable. Because, this is Jesus we are talking about. The Son of God. The one who just a few weeks ago made his glorious entry into our world via a virgin birth, celebrated by a choir of angels, proclaimed and witnessed by shepherds who deserted their flocks. Honored and marked by wise men who traveled from far away lands, bearing luxurious gifts. Even denounced by the threatened King Herod, who feared for his own position of power and privilege. So, for the Son of God, to now wade into the muddy waters of redemption alongside the gathered crowd, being chastised by John the Baptist as he calls them "a brood of vipers." Standing both in vulnerability and solidarity with the sin sick crowds. Making this his initial act at the onset of his public ministry as the Messiah. Is nothing short (in my mind) of miraculous.

And, still there's more. As Jesus comes up out of those same waters we witness the Spirit of God descending upon him. Hearing God proclaiming, "this is my beloved." And, in that moment we are invited into that belovedness. As God fully embraces the beloved Son, the beloved community, the beloved creation! Here we witness Jesus becoming a living example of how we claim our individual and our communal salvation. Through our own ability to stand together in vulnerability and solidarity with one another. Entering the same waters, side by side. No longer chaff separated from grain, but the entire stalk of wheat being cleansed, for sake of the whole.

As a child, hearing for the first time that I was in desperate need of salvation. Lest I wish to end up in the damning flames of hell for all eternity. Terrified me to my very core. And, in that moment, my communal baptism seemingly meant nothing. While my own individual salvation suddenly meant everything. Unfortunately, (or maybe simply developmentally) nine year old Kate thought that religion, faith, Jesus, the Bible were all part of an individual sport with Salvation being it's ultimate goal. But, if salvation is something that we can only "win" through our own individual actions, prayers, even thoughts. And, if we only come to know whether or not

we even won this prize at the end of our life. Then what does any of it matter? It would seem that God did not come down to earth as a human baby, to share in our mortal condition, healing, sharing meals, ministering to the outcasts and sinners, the destitute and the poor; nor did he die, and rise again all in order that we might somehow suffer through the race of life to hopefully win a prize at the end of it all.

No, Jesus stood alongside all those weary souls seeking redemption out in the wilderness, as a witness to the fact that we cannot do this alone. He went down into those waters, one amongst many, the first act in his ministry, as a testament to the fact that we don't do this alone. Salvation is not a prize to be won as an individual sport. Salvation is a gift that we are invited to take part in as we continually join together in solidarity as part of God's beloved community.

Nine year old Kate so desperately yearned to be "saved." She expected fireworks, a change of heart, something not far off from miraculous, as she prayed that prayer with her counselor on a canoe dock at camp almost 25 years ago. And, while she may have told you that never happened. I would tell you differently. This past week, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry gave an address to our church and the nation, in which he called us to renew our relationship with God, with one another, and with our commitment to the ideals and values that we share. As he urged (and I quote) "unselfish sacrificial love for one another may well be the supreme value on which . democracy itself depends." Recalling our national motto, found on our seal, E pluribus unum. Meaning "from many one." The beauty and the challenge of seeking salvation, is that it must be done in a way that allows us to claim the truth that we are wrapped up in something wonderfully bigger than ourselves. In something that invites us, like baptism, like prayer, like church, like community, to become one out of many. One with ourselves as we are reminded that we are beloved. One with one another as we claim our membership as part of the body of Christ. And, one with God as we commit to being part of something greater than our own self interests. Because it is here that we can find, claim, and begin to experience salvation.

In light of our first Sunday in Epiphany, as we mark Jesus' baptism and remember our own into this one holy and catholic (meaning universal) church. And, In this season in which we remember the light that guided the wise men to the Messiah. I would like to invite you into a practice for this year. Here I have what are called "star words". A star word, as a good friend of mine, and the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in Oklahoma, told me is a word meant to serve as a guide. Based on the star that guided the Magi to the Messiah, so that they might share their gifts with him. In this spirit, our word can serve as a guide that draws us closer to Jesus, to our baptismal promises, and to our commitment to God and one another. By taking a star today you are invited to contemplate this year how it is that as a beloved child of God you are called to both follow the light and shine it as well. By meditating on, praying with, or simply recalling your word on a daily basis. I hope you will join me in this practice, so that we might be guided together in reclaiming our identity as one, with God, with one another, and with the world. Because, that is where our salvation can be found.