Reflecting on our Gospel readings this past few weeks, it may feel as if we're traveling around in some sort of time machine. On Christmas Eve, Mother Marcia led the children of Christ Church in exploring Mary and Joseph's arduous journey to the Bethlehem inn where Jesus was born. The Sunday after Christmas, we went all the way back to "the beginning," where the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and all things came into being through him.

Last week, we leapt forward to meet a 12-year-old Jesus who separated from his family to remain behind in the temple in Jerusalem. At the Epiphany this past Thursday, we returned to gaze once again on the face of the infant Jesus, as three wise men following a star paid homage to "the King of the Jews." This morning, we find ourselves on the banks of the River Jordan some 30 years later, Jesus standing alongside throngs of people seeking redemption through baptism by the prophet John the Baptist.

All this movement across time reminds me of the iconic 80s movie "Back to the Future," where the character of Marty, played by Michael J. Fox, transports himself back to the 1950s, and there finds himself stuck in time. For a good portion of the movie, Marty frantically devotes all his energy to trying to move forward in time, and get back to his life as it was, or would be, in the future. In his quest, he stumbles upon obstacle after obstacle—confining him to his current point in time. "Back to the Future" is just one of many movies out there that tell a story about being stuck in a particular place in time. It's a story that in some ways feels eerily similar to our real-life experience of the present day. With an ongoing global pandemic, continuing social injustices, and endless divisive rhetoric, we can feel trapped, unable to move forward—stuck in a time warp of sorts.

But in considering what the Gospel reveals this morning about the Baptism of our Lord, we may find it helpful to think about how God's kingdom transcends the confines and limitations of time and space—and how his promises apply to all people across eternity.

What exactly does scripture tell us about the momentous occasion of Jesus's baptism? Well, Luke's account, along with Matthew's and Mark's, are relatively brief in their depiction of this event. The Gospel writers offer a mere summary of what occurred—just a few lines, with Matthew alone mentioning a cursory exchange of dialogue between Jesus and John the Baptist that reveals Jesus's baptism will "fulfill all righteousness."

Beyond this, the Gospels offer little insight into the details of that day. In many ways, we can only imagine what exactly occurred. But we know what all the Gospel accounts do *not* include: at the baptism of Jesus, the Messiah, God incarnate, we have no details of any grand announcement, no spotlighted platform, no VIP treatment for Jesus. In Luke's proclamation that Jesus was baptized along with all the people, we may assume he didn't jump the line, didn't request any special favors, didn't seek a place of honor. Luke tells us simply that when all the people were baptized, Jesus also was baptized. And afterward, in the bodily form of a descending dove, his divine identity is affirmed: *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*

Let's think about that for a moment. Despite being himself without sin, Jesus, God incarnate, stands on the banks of the Jordan River among ordinary sinners, revealing his shared humanity—and his solidarity—with all God's people. And following the revelation of his identity, Jesus does not put a crown on his head and proclaim himself an all-powerful King. He does not demand his followers put him on a pedestal and blindly pledge their loyalty. No, from here,

after a period of prayer and of testing, Jesus goes out into the world, embarking on his mission and ministry: of healing the blind and the lame and the sick, of teaching the multitudes, and of pastoring to the people, despite the obstacles from the world around him, despite persecution from Roman authorities, despite opposition from his own Jewish brethren. And ultimately, he gives himself up to the cross, praying in his last moments, "Father, forgive them"—the greatest demonstration of love mankind will ever experience.

This is the path we are called to follow in our own baptism within the Body of Christ, the journey we take together as Jesus's disciples—to move past being stuck in darkness and recurring patterns of human sin, and to live into God's call for us. Jesus never implies discipleship will be easy or comfortable. In fact, we know from his life and his death that suffering is an inevitable part of God's cosmic plan. But we also know that in our suffering, God offers us the comforting promises revealed in Isaiah: *I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned. You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.*

The question is, when we feel trapped in an endless loop of chaos and confusion, where can we find moments of epiphany to free ourselves? How can we awaken each day anchored to those beautiful, life-affirming words: *you are mine, you are precious in my sight, I love you?* Words that attest to our inheritance as God's sons and daughters, brought together from the ends of the earth—affirmed in our baptism as His beloved children—and empowered to minister to the world in Christ's name?

I believe our deepest, most-authentic moments of epiphany will not be found in any of our worldly identities and affirmations: not as we excel academically or

professionally, not as we build financial security and acquire material goods, not as we seek accolades and celebrity, not as we bask in privilege and power, not in our political affiliations or national identities, not even as we live and thrive within our own families and friend groups.

Our moments of true epiphany are found standing among those Jesus stands among: those outcast and downcast; those we walk by on the streets and avert our gaze from; those caught in cycles of poverty, persecution, and violence; those forgotten about in prison cells and in the cells of addiction and disease and self-destruction; those mired in the deep pain of loss and grief.

The moments that foster the greatest depth of relationship and connection with God are found standing in solidarity with our brothers and sisters of all nationalities, races, classes, abilities, and life circumstances—all God's beloved. And just as Peter and John went to share the power of the Holy Spirit with the Samaritans, outsiders and enemies of the Jews, we too are called to move forward, to sludge through and beyond our dark dwelling places, to find a way to forgive and pray for our enemies and to inclusively love neighbor near and far, as difficult as that may be.

Henri Nouwen, theologian and author of Life of the Beloved, says:

> When we claim and constantly reclaim the truth of being the chosen ones, we soon discover within ourselves a deep desire to reveal to others their own chosenness. Instead of making us feel...we are better, more precious or valuable than others, our awareness of being chosen opens our eyes to the chosenness of others. That is the great joy of being chosen: the discovery that others are chosen as well. In the house of God there are many mansions. There is a place for everyone - a unique, special place.

> Once we deeply trust that we ourselves are precious in God's eyes, we are able to recognize the preciousness of others and their unique places in God's heart.

In our chosenness, and as the baptized Body of Christ, we share hope in the name of Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit that has the power to transform us and transform the world. We share the hope that as God gazes upon us, his beloved, he is well pleased. We share the knowledge that God's plan rises above our recurring calamities, our relived crises, our repeat feelings of being stuck.

As we reaffirm our baptismal covenant together this morning, let's consider how we can seek moments of epiphany *from among*—experiences that will empower us to break free from the bondage of human sin, so we can fix our focus and our footing firmly within God's kingdom. Let us recommit ourselves to fulfilling our baptismal promises to seek and serve Christ in all people, to respect the dignity of every human being, to love our neighbors as ourselves.

May we treat every day as an opportunity to turn from sin, to engage in the life of discipleship and community in the One Body that begins at our baptism, to stand firm in the truth of God's love for us, and to share that with our brothers and sisters to the end of the earth—as the God who created us for His glory calls us all by name, precious and loved.