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# The First Sunday after the Epiphany

**The Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ**

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As we start another year, as we enter the chilly waters of the Jordan with Jesus, we begin by acknowledging that something is off, something is amiss in us, in our lives, in our world. Why else would anyone get up off their couch and head out into the wilderness with John the Baptist? Why else would we wander to church on a snow-blasted morning? You don't go out to the desert in search of a cure unless you know something is deeply broken within. You don't take the icy plunge without a hungering for more. Our wilderness is more metaphorical, but no less real. Aren't New Year's Resolutions a kind of self-imposed wilderness experience? We head off into the foreign and unwelcoming terrain called Dieting, or Exercise, or Temperance, or More Prayer, or More Spirituality; I don't know about yours but my conscience is basically my John the Baptist – howling, shouting, pepping us up. Repent, change, resolve to do different. We hear him. We resolve to say no to booze, to eat fish or vegetables more often, and to do more yoga on our back porches, and this will involve sacrifice and commitment, if we are to make it til February in our Wilderness Experience.

For whatever reason I've made more than a few New Year's Resolutions this year. Now, as my father said, NY resolutions are like birthday wishes – it's bad luck to actually share them. So I won't.

Here's the thing with New Year's resolutions in my experience: they don't live up to the hype. We get skinnier, then what? Resolutions don't deliver because it's just a bedrock point that we cannot resolve ourselves into salvation. Into bliss. Into peace. The broken human will cannot initiate its own repair. We stand in need of something else, something beyond. I spent most of my 20s seeing a therapist in Pittsburgh named John. Being the heady person that I am, I was so taken with trying to figure out what made him, as a therapist, tick. I couldn't help but wonder: Why would you ever want to subject yourself to listening to the same set of people rehash the same set of problems over an indefinite length of time? "John," I said one session, "how do I know I'm really doing the work? How do I know that I haven't turned this into another game of self-deception? How do I know that these conversations are changing me?" John said, "Well Garrett, in the end, the only thing that changes anyone is love. Behind all my

reading of Jung, Freud, and Klein, is just the desire to love. That's the only thing that changes anybody."

Baptism is the immersion into love. That sounds a little trite. Baptism is the moment I give up my project of self-improvement, self-betterment, my anxious desire to be seen, and just let myself be loved. If I am honest with myself, I know: New Year's resolutions contain more than a pinch of hate. We look back on the past year, and we dislike, even hate a particular habit. We hate our weight. We hate our inability to stick up for ourselves. We hate ourselves.

It's only human nature. We condemn our habits, our bodies, our feelings, our faults – and this condemnation leads us to – however subtly – condemn others. We condemn those who appear to have it all together, and we condemn those who've failed, who reflect back to us the self we'd rather deny. We think we can heal ourselves, but we also suspect that can never be the case. It cannot be the case because our love isn't fully developed. It's faulty, broken, immature. We need to be immersed in an Infinite Love outside of ourselves. We need to be baptized. We need to be washed of our endless desire to try and heal ourselves.

If you made it to church this Sunday, all I really want to say is that you are loved. You crossing the threshold of the church's doors on as wintry and messy a morning as this one is a sign of something. It means something. And wherever you are this morning, I just hope you know that in your conflict, and tension, and resolution – God loves you. You are baptized in that love. You are a different person because God loves you, right? You are baptized.

And here's what I think happens when we grow more and more into our identities as baptized children of God. We start to become more compassionate, gentler, and we start to lower our expectations for ourselves and others. The baptized know that people both really want to change and yet cannot by themselves. They cannot change by themselves because their love is faulty, broken, and insecure. We cannot "love ourselves" back into being and wholeness. The baptized don't make their commitment to others based on their performance, their success, or their put-togetherness. The baptized are trying to show forth an unconditional love. Because it's only when we are seen and

affirmed beneath all our resolutions that we can change and grow.

I don't just pray that you have low expectations for others. If you do have a NY's resolution I'd recommend that it be to have low expectations for yourself. When you expect little from yourself, you are able to surprise yourself. You are able to celebrate small victories. You are able to raise a toast to tiny achievements. You picked up that phone and called your mom today – excellent – there are many possible universes where you didn't. You ate a smaller portion. Praise the Lord. You got over your great kitchen inertia and decided to unload the dishwasher. Thanks be to God. When you have low expectations, life is just more interesting, more surprising. Expectations and resolutions are the thing that led you to the wilderness, and they can be good things. But they can't effect deep change, lasting transformation. Only love will do that. And you are loved. So loved. Just the way you are. Whether you've resolved to be a better you, or just the same you. Lower your expectations for others, lower your expectations for yourself. And raise your expectations for God. Let yourself be loved this year. It will change you.