

In God's name, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Just before the Jordan River reaches the Dead Sea, there's a shallow spot, a cul-de-sac of pooling water; and from time immemorial, caravans from across the Near East used this as a place to cross.

This was a marketplace where cultures gathered, friends reconnected, merchants met, ideas were exchanged, and products traded; it was a living Facebook.

On any given day you might see Arabs in white headdresses, Babylonians with rings of gold in their noses, and Africans with brightly colored fabrics — oranges, greens, reds — dramatically framed against ebony skin.

It was here, at this shallow spot, where John begins his preaching. And here, where people wonder and ask, "Are you the messiah?"

"One more powerful is coming," says John; "I baptize with water, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In other words, John's baptism is merely a baptism of repentance. It's a sign that identifies the Spirit behind the action.

And Jesus' baptism is a baptism of rebirth, a moment of grace, a sacrament that will communicate to the one baptized a whole new life; more than identifying the spirit behind the action, this calls the Spirit of God to hover over the waters of baptism,

as Genesis describes, stirring the soul of the one being baptized.

Baptism calls forth from the baptized to connect with God, to be one with God's people on earth, and to participate in God's mission of restoration and reconciliation.

When I was in sixth grade my brother Jeff gave me a book for Christmas titled *Kon-Tiki*. Kon-Tiki, a name for the Incan sun god, was also the name of a raft used by Thor Heyerdahl, a Norwegian explorer and writer who, in 1947, sailed across the Pacific Ocean, from South America to the Polynesian Islands.

Kon-Tiki is also the title of the Academy Award-winning documentary film that chronicled Hyerdahl's adventures. and a 2012 film of the same title, dramatizing the book.

What few people may realize of this great sea adventurer is that he once had a paralyzing fear of water.

During WW II, while training in Canada with the Free Norwegian Forces, Hyerdahl canoed a dangerous river that ended in a waterfall. As he neared the rapids, the canoe capsized plunging him into the raging water.

The swirling waters swept him helplessly toward the waterfall, when, almost as if outside of himself, a strange thought entered his mind.

He would soon discover which of his

parents was right: his father believed in heaven and his mother did not.

The Lords Prayer came to him and another strange thing happened. A burst of energy surged through his body and he battled the river. It was as if a hand was moved him, strongly and surely toward the shore.

The Thor Heyerdahl who climbed out of the river was transformed from the Thor Heyerdahl who was plunged into the rapids. The waters of the river changed him, literally baptizing him into a new life.

The old Heyerdahl had a deathly fear of water; the new Heyerdahl did not. The old Heyerdahl had questions about God and life after death; the new Heyerdahl did not.

Heyerdahl's experience in the waters of the river illustrates what happens to us in the waters of baptism.

The person we are after baptism is substantively different from the person we were before entering the waters. Before baptism, we were spiritually less — so hard to believe that the beauty of an infant could be anything less. And yet, to be alive in Christ is to be so much more!

Perhaps another example will make this more clear.

Early Christians used the image of grafting the newly baptized onto the Body of Christ. Just as a farmer grafts a twig from one tree to another, so baptism grafts us onto the

Body of Christ.

Or, for those who aren't farmers, think of a lamp's plug and a socket — a lamp, a plug, a connection, a draw of electricity, and the lamp glows with light.

In baptism, we're plugged into Christ, so to speak, and we begin to draw life from him. A covenant is struck. A holy melding of lives that shares purpose, community, grace, and mission.

It's important to note that baptism is not an end-point; rather, it's a beginning, the first of many steps. In fact, what happens after baptism is as important as what happens during.

Let's return to the twig grafted to the tree.

Once a twig is grafted into a tree branch, it will grow by infusing itself into the life of the tree and the tree into it. Without this sharing of life, the twig shrivels and dies.

The same is true of baptism. Once we're grafted onto Christ, we must grow and become part of Christ's body. If we do not, we risk shriveling, drying up, and becoming a creature completely unto ourselves, apart from the whole, losing our connection to the Body, the Church.

I recall 30 years ago in seminary when one of my professors talked about the Christian who, by virtue of baptism, is part of the Body of Christ; and who through habit, hubris, self-sufficiency, his or her own stubbornness or idea of what the Body of

Christ should be, is so full of himself or herself that they become their own world, their own tree — to use our metaphor.

He quoted the poem, *Indwelling*, written by the Isle of Man poet T.E. Browne. Browne used a shell to describe the baptized who is apart from God.

*If you could empty all yourself of self,
like to a shell dishabited,
then might He find you on the Ocean shelf,
and say — "This is not dead," — and fill
you with Himself instead.*

*But you all replete with only you,
and have such shrewd activity,
that, when He comes, He says — "This is
enough unto itself — 'I'd better let it be: it is
so small and full, there is no room for Me."*

So, for we twigs grafted to the Body of Christ, the question is: how do I continue to grow, no matter how young or old I may be, no matter how long it's been since we've sought a new rector for our parish, no matter how settled or fresh I am as a member of the Body of Christ?

Listen to Paul in Second Colossians: *As God's chosen ones ... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another ... forgive each other ... above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Let the peace of Christ rule your hearts ...*

We grow and become part of Christ by imitating Christ into whose body we've

been grafted.

We treat others kindly as Christ has treated us. We treat others patiently as Christ has treated us. We forgive others as Christ has forgiven us. We love others as Christ has loved us.

In short, we grow and become part of Christ by imitating Christ, whose life we receive in baptism.

And we live in a world so hungry for disciples and apostles who recognize Christ. A world where:

- 20 people in Paris die in a week when terrorists seek to silence satire
- an abandoned backpack rains down horror on cheering crowds at the Boston Marathon finish line
- shiploads of Syrian refugees are abandoned to the seas surrounding Italy
- an Episcopal bishop kills a bicyclist and is charged with manslaughter
- a Milford high-schooler is stabbed to death by a rebuffed prom date
- the cost of life and limb in the war on global terrorism continues to rise
- lawmakers are at a standstill, where ideology cannot find common ground
- 200 Nigerian girls kidnapped 9 months ago remain in the hands of terrorists
- more than 23% of CT's children live in poverty (-\$23,800 for family of four)

Overwhelming. Or is it?

We are the Body of Christ. When these doors open onto New Park Ave, they open onto the mission field of Grace, the Episcopal Church at this corner in Harford, CT. You step out and into your spheres of influence as baptized members of Christ's Body, charged, by that baptism, to make a meaningful difference where you live and work.

And before the day's over there'll be plenty of opportunities to respond lovingly to the world around us:

- Catching the door and holding it for the young mother with her children in tow
- Resisting the urge to take out the old gentleman who's pushing his grocery cart in the center of the aisle and poking his way along to *your* check out lane
- Sending a card to someone, perhaps long forgotten, whom God's Spirit suddenly brings into your mind because she needs to hear from you, today
- Exhibiting patience when the sedan on your right zips ahead, cuts you off, and makes the light
- Placing your hands you're your husband's, wife's, partner's and sanctifying the moment by inviting, "Let's say a prayer together... for us, for our family, for our neighborhood, for our word"

Jesus knows your name. You're his beloved. You are not alone. You are loved.

Regardless of where you may be on the continuum of belief this morning — from

feeling Christ at your shoulder to feeling the echo of loneliness in your prayer — you are God's beloved. He knows your name. There is nothing you can do to separate yourself from God. You are not alone.

Be inspired. Strive, as one baptized, to:

- Continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers
- Persevere in resisting evil and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord
- Proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ
- Seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself
- Strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being

Be aware of life around you! Be a witness of the presence of God's love, be fearless in witnessing that life to others. Tell them, by how you live, that He is born. He is made manifest. He is risen. Alleluia!

Amen.