

## **Sermon Baptism of our Lord 2011 and the Baptism of Alice Lessing**

The season of Epiphany which will last us until March 9 when Lent begins is about Christ being made manifest. The scripture readings and events in our Lord's life feature prominently in this season. We begin this time with the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, the feast when John the Baptist baptizes Jesus....the heavens open and John sees the Spirit of God descend on Jesus like a dove and God declares **“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”**

This indeed is a fitting feast for us to celebrate our own baptism and to baptize new people into the faith. This first baptism of 2011 will formally bring Alice KateLynn Lessing into the Body of Christ and the faith of the church. While this is a joyful day for Ali, it is also one marked by sadness that one person is not here in the flesh to join in this important day in Ali's life. It was just four days ago that we said our formal goodbyes to her foster mother Donna Fish in this same room.

The messages that we heard that day is that Donna taught us all how we are to live out our faith and to go on....and the greatest tribute we could give to Donna's memory is to continue on and carry on with what she gave us and what she gave to Ali. And so while this day carries with it an inherent sadness it is also a day of rejoicing that new life continues in the Body of Christ as Ali becomes a full member in that Body.

Our readings today helps us with their message of God's choosing his elect in every generation and of our responsibility to live into that calling. In our reading from the Book of Isaiah it begins, *“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.*

Choseness has long been understood as entitlement that has resulted in violence and terror for many. What would it mean if we instead understood choseness as belovedness? Such theology offers rich possibilities as it takes the emphasis away from the supposed qualities of those who are loved and emphasizes instead the gracious gift of love itself. Still the idea of choseness raises serious questions of who is left out of choice and left out of love. The Isaiah passage adds an important criterion: the bringing of justice – leading us to claim that if we love, we make justice. Feeling loved leads to more self-esteem and consequently a better ability to act justly and to extend love beyond the confines of a chosen few. Claiming our belovedness by God empowers us to extend that love to ourselves, to others, and more fully to God.

We are here today to baptize Ali because in large part she has felt and known love from Donna and Art Fish. Through their love and guidance God has demonstrated that she is a beloved and chosen child of God. God's love of Ali and each of us is unconditional and not predicated on whether we are baptized or not, so why then do we baptize and what we believe takes place in the sacrament of baptism. The catechism of the Episcopal Church teaches us first that sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive grace. Baptism, then, is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God. While God's love is unconditional, baptism is about joining the family of believers and being initiated into the Body of Christ. What is the

inward and spiritual grace that comes with baptism? We believe that the inward spiritual grace in Baptism is union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God's family the Church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit.

So, we gather today for the baptism of Ali on the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus because first and foremost she has experienced the love of God through those who care for her and love her. In spite of difficult times in her young life, the love of God has come through to her. She knows she has been and continues to be loved. She knows that she has experienced love in this place and chose to be baptized into Christ's family in this parish community of St. James'. She has already extended the love she has experienced to others. Like her foster mom Donna, she has learned to accept people where they are, just as they are...with their differences, with their faults and weaknesses as well as their unique gifts. While still young, this insight into the reality of the human condition has given Ali wisdom beyond her years.

This day, the feast of the Baptism of our Lord the Holy Spirit descends upon Ali and God says to her as He says to each of us, *"This is my Daughter or Son, my Beloved with whom I am well pleased.* Our task in this life is to strive to believe that this is true....that we are a beloved of God...and in doing so to extend that love and justice to others. Amen.