As I read through this week's readings…
something in the epistle grabbed my attention
The reading… from the Acts of the Apostles
Take place ***after*** the resurrection
So why is it ***here?*** On the First Sunday ***after*** the Epiphany?
When we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus?

Well, there ***is*** a connection.
At the invitation of Cornelius, a Roman centurion,
Peter went to his house… and for ***the first time***…
began to evangelize… to Gentiles!

When I think how the early church reached gentiles
I always go to Paul first.
Most of the Epistles are credited to Paul.
But peter? Not so much.
But here it is
The first to evangelize gentiles… is Peter!

Peter fairly exploded with his good news:

It's God's own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites!
It makes no difference who you are or where you're from…
if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open.
The Message he sent to the children of Israel…
that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again…
well, he's doing it everywhere, among everyone.

The Message is for everyone…

Not just the privileged… or the powerful… ***Everyone!***
Even you!

Peter reminded them of what transpired

You know the story of what happened in Judea.
It began in Galilee after John preached a total life-change.
Then Jesus arrived from Nazareth,
anointed by God with the Holy Spirit, ready for action.

He went through the country helping people
and healing everyone who was beaten down by the Devil.
He was able to do all this because God was with him.

God was with him… and God is with us…

Then Peter explained ***how*** he knew these things.

We saw it, saw it all, everything he did in the land of the Jews
and in Jerusalem where they killed him, hung him from a cross.
But in three days God had him up, alive,
and out where he could be seen.

Not everyone saw him… he wasn't put on public display.
Witnesses had been carefully handpicked by God beforehand… us!

We were the ones,
there to eat and drink with him after he came back from the dead.
He commissioned us to announce this in public,
to bear solemn witness
that he is in fact the One
whom God destined
as Judge of the living and dead.

But we're not alone in this. Our witness…
that he is the means to forgiveness of sins
is backed up by the witness of all the prophets.

And the whole story… began with the ***Baptism of Jesus***
And what a story it is!
Magnificent! Divine! God and Man together! Right here on earth!

All four Gospels tell of Jesus coming to John the Baptist,
who was baptizing crowds in the Jordan River
"for repentance and the forgiveness of sins."
Only in Matthew, however, do we hear what seems an obvious question:

Why would Jesus need to repent or be baptized?
John said…
Jesus should be baptizing John, not the other way around…
But Jesus insisted… and asked John to baptize him…
To fulfill all righteousness.

There's this little book… written by… Oscar Cullmann
Baptism in the New Testament
Where he explains…

It was not a baptism of repentance for* Jesus' *sins…
It was baptism of repentance… for <u>our</u> sin! Yours, mine, <u>every ones</u>!

Ah ***hah!***
That explains it!

Just as Jesus <u>died on the cross</u>,
not for his own sin,
but for yours and mine,
he was also <u>BAPTIZED</u>
with you and me.

The work he did for us on the cross
Began with his ***baptism!***

When everyone there experienced the Trinity on Jordan's bank
as Jesus, the Son, came up from the water
to see the Holy Spirit descending like a dove
and the Creator God declared Jesus… ***the beloved son.***

Before that? Nothing. Nothing we know about.
Not a single miracle… or healings… even teaching.
All the rest took place ***after*** the heavens opened
And the Holy Spirit fell upon him
And voice of the father proclaimed…
This is my Son! In him I am well pleased!

Only then… did he begin to reveal his true self…. His divine nature…

When Jesus went to John to be baptized,
He joined others who acknowledged
Their lives were completely messed up…
Cluttered with bad behavior… yet empty and uncertain.
They gathered there for a fresh start…. A do-over… A re-boot…

And they all saw it. Everyone who came to be baptized by John
Saw it all!
Jesus… publicly demonstrating the meaning of his name: ***Emmanuel.***
God is with us…
God has come to us…
God has joined us in this world…
in our human condition…
in our human predicament…
in our human wants and needs and fears and joys
God with us!

I understood the concept of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross
Taking on our sins
But now… I have a ***new*** understanding
of his sacrifice
taking on human and divine nature at his baptism

That's where we are today… at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Before this there were no miracles or healings or raising of the dead
All of his Godly work began ***after*** his baptism
That why this reading comes so close to the beginning of the year
Christmas… He's born…
Epiphany… the Wise Men arrive…
Then… The Baptism of our Lord…
And his ***real*** work begins.
The ***real*** work.
Our own lives in Christ also begin at baptism…
the sacramental entrance into full membership in Christian Faith
It separates us, marks us, as part of a global community of faith
That's been around for thousands of years…
And will continue… ***forever!***
forever!

I don't know if you've ever noticed this
But our very old Baptismal font
Sits in the back of the church
It's positioned near the entrance
Because baptism is ***symbolic*** of our own entrance
into faith in Christ Jesus

In the very early church, getting baptized required a lot!
Unbaptized persons were not allowed in the church during communion
Or even sit in galleries separate from the rest of the congregation

Sometimes, they could come for the beginning of the service,
but they had to ***leave… before*** Holy Eucharist
to attend classes.

They had ***lots*** of instruction.
Three years of intensive education and training
Those apostolic fathers believed an ***investment*** in faith was required
Because ancient Christianity was hard… and dangerous…
And people had to be prepared for what was coming
And that took a lot more than a sprinkling water and sacred words

It was rigorous… And not everyone made it though…
You see… They were making disciples!
That would learn and teach and carry the Good News to the world
And I thank God for them… because without them…
This church would not exist
Their sacrificial lives make our 21st century faith possible.
So when those catechumenates
That's what they were called… ***catechumenates***
completed their ***years*** of preparation
They were allowed just inside the door… and no further…
Where the baptismal font was located
And they were baptized right there
in the entrance of the church…
their entrance into the faith

The congregation had to turn all the way around
and face the back of the church to watch

But once they were baptized
They were welcomed into the community
with ***grace*** and ***love*** and were finally allowed to receive
the blessed sacrament.

Their training and preparation made for extraordinary first communion
They had to be ready… for it to be ***effective***

Pastor Bernard Wright, Missionary Baptist preacher
warns his folks before baptism…

If you have the devil in you
you go into the water a dry devil
and come out a wet devil

You see… it's not the water and the words that change you
It's not a magic trick to get you into heaven
It's a symbol of your commitment

It's your commitment to God that changes you
Your baptism is the sacramental symbol of that change
Your public presentation of commitment
To a sacrificial life in Christ

And if you're wondering what that sacrificial life in Christ means to you
I'm going to help you with that… right now.
Please pull out your prayer books and turn to page 302

This is the Final Exam before baptism
Six questions that tie together what it means to be a Chirstian

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?

Because if you don't accept Christ, and if you don't turn to him,
If you accept him as your savior…
Then there is no point in being baptized

So do you?

Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?

If you honestly think that you can have all your sins forgiven
and be welcomed into God's heavenly kingdom
base upon what you say and do in your lifetime
you will fail
miserably.
But if you trust God… completely…
Trust in his grace and love
Then you will be just fine.

So… do you?

Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

I remember this little clip of a little girl
Refusing to do as she was told
Saying…
You're not the boss of me!

So who is the boss of us?
Are we our own bosses?
Are we in charge of all we say and do?
Because if that's the case…
We have fools for bosses

But if we truly turn our lives over to God
And allow him to guide us through this life
If we promise to follow and obey him as lord
Then we will come to know God's grace and love
That is way beyond human understanding

Do you promise to follow and obey?

Those are the last three…
But the ***first*** three actually require you to ***do*** something

Do you renounce Satan
and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Do you renounce the evil powers of this world
which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

and if you answer …
I renounce them.

When you confront evil and temptation you say…
Out loud if necessary…
This is bad… this is evil… and I will have nothing to do with it!

God ***wants*** us…
And he wants ***all*** of us… Body, mind, and spirit…
Hook, line, and sinker… ***All of us!***

And why shouldn't he?
After all… He did give ***himself*** for us
Hook, line, and sinker… At ***his*** baptism

And there's one other thing…
You already made these promises to God…
At your own baptisms…

Now just keep doing it… for the rest of your life! Amen.