St. Columba's Episcopal Church
2 Epiphany, January 18, 2026
John 1:29-42; Psalm 40:9; Prayer
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

John the Baptist is an important figure in each of the four Gospels. His role is to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah and to point to Jesus, naming him as God's Chosen One. In this morning's lesson from the Gospel of John, John the Baptist declares who Jesus is:"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

In the Eucharist and other prayers and in our hymns, we often encounter the idea that Jesus takes away the sin of the world. What does this mean? It can't mean that since Jesus lived there is no sin in the world, no violent and hateful behavior! We know very well that such sin is in our world now and has always been in the world. The idea that Jesus has taken away the sin of the world may seem absurd if we understand this as removing sin from the world.

This is not what the author of John's Gospel means by these words. For him, sin is not about immoral or unlawful behavior. Sin means not being in relationship with God. The opposite of being sinful is being a believer, and being a believer cannot be reduced to agreeing with certain statements of belief or creeds. A believer is someone who is in an active, living, dynamic relationship with God. Such a relationship is made possible through the incarnation of God in Christ that we celebrate at Christmas. In Jesus God connected with humanity in a different, closer way. According to the author of John's Gospel, because Jesus entered fully into the human experience, our active, living, dynamic relationship with God is made possible. Christians believe that through JesusChrist – in nature both human and divine – human beings can connect closely with God. In this way Jesus is the one who takes away the sin of the world, the separation of human beings from God.

Last Sunday we honored The Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ by joining together in The Renewal of Baptismal Vows (The Book of Common Prayer, pages 292-4). This begins with a statement of faith, the Apostles' Creed. The creed is followed by questions which ask us to promise to live as people who are in an active, living, dynamic relationship with God. Will we come to church, receive Communion and pray? Will we actively resist evil and when we fail to resist evil, will we repent and return to God? Will we proclaim Christ by word and example? Will we seek and serve Christ in all persons? Will we strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being? To each question we reply, "I will, with God's help." We do not – we cannot – do all this on our own. Our faithful lives are lived in partnership with God, by our daily choices and with God's help and grace.

The last of The Renewal of Baptismal Vows questions seems especially important in today's world. "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" "Strive" is a very strong word. It means to struggle, to labor, to do one's best, to try very hard to make something happen. We are called to strive for justice for all people and for peace. There are many ways we can do this. We each have different gifts and talents that can be used in such striving. We each have different circumstances in which to act. I believe that we need to ask the Holy Spirit to set us on fire and motivate us to strive for justice and peace, and we need to ask God to guide us in our action.

As we strive for justice and peace we are, at the same time, to respect the dignity of every human being. What is the source of human dignity? We believe that every human being is made in the image of God, with the capacity to love God and to live in harmony with creation,

with other human beings, and with God. We believe that everyone has the capacity to be in an active, living, dynamic relationship with God. Our Creator gives all of us our worth. We may – I think we must – make judgments about what behavior is right and what is wrong, about what is good and what is evil. But we are not to judge the worth of other human beings. That judgment is God's and God's alone.

To be angry with certain behaviors, to be intolerant of certain attitudes, and to find certain courses of action foolish or worse – all these we may do. Morality may even demand this of us. But we are not to judge other human beings in a way that robs them of their God-given dignity. No one – high or low, rich or poor, sinner or saint. God has promised to judge the people and the nations with equity. God will be the judge of all.

As I thought about what it means to be in an active, living, dynamic relationship with God, it occurred to me that such a relationship would be a good definition of prayer. As the Prayer Book puts it, prayer is our response to God"by thoughts and by deeds, with or without words." Prayer is about being in relationship with God. In prayer we bring ourselves before God with as much openness as we can, creature to Creator. We dispose ourselves to apprehend something of God and God's truth.

This past week I was filling out a long questionnaire as a new patient in a medical practice in Augusta. In a section on Stress Management, there was a question about "relaxation techniques." Do you do any of the following: meditation, breathing, Tai Chi, yoga or prayer. When I got to prayer, I laughed aloud and thought that the person who designed the questionnaire didn't know much about prayer in the Christian tradition.

Christian spirituality is fundamentally about God. God is at the beginning, is the beginning because God is our creator. As John the Baptist pointed to Jesus, prayer directs our focus to God. Prayer isn't a technique for managing stress. In fact, the witness of Holy Scripture would suggest that prayer is sometimes very stressful. Think of the many psalms of complaint, of the prophets who argued with God about what God called them to do, of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. I don't know about you, but I've screamed at God many times. In prayer we might struggle with God – why didn't God heal the person I love? In prayer we may feel God call us to repentance, to a costly change in our hearts or in our lives. I do believe that in prayer we may experience the peace that passes all understanding. But this is very different from the physiological relaxation you can achieve by deep breathing.

Christian spirituality is rooted in our experience of Jesus. Christian spirituality is about being in relationship with Christ. The goal of Christian spirituality is for us to grow in grace and sanctity, by the power of the Holy Spirit, until we become like Christ. Again, if being calm and serene is your goal, Christianity may not be a good choice! The process of transformation into Christ-likeness is not quick or easy. Each of us knows the barriers we face in that process. We often struggle against the Spirit. We stubbornly hold on to our ways even when God's way is clearly before us.

God is faithful. God's promises are trustworthy. As we await the fulfillment of God's promises, may we join with the psalmist in saying, "I love to do your will, O my God; your law is deep in my heart." In Jesus' name. Amen.