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“The people were filled with expectation.” That is how Luke described the excitement around John the Baptist. When do we experience that sort of public emotion? Doesn’t it seem easier to unite around something negative than positive? Condemnation doesn’t require the commitment demanded by approval or acclaim, so we often avoid showing public enthusiasm about people or events more meaningful than sports.

When John the Baptist came on the scene, he appeared like a combination of the Beatles and Bernie Sanders with a dash of Joan of Arc in the mix. Like the Beatles, John attracted crowds who loved to hear him, enjoyed his unconventional appearance, and relished riding the wave of enthusiasm created by the masses who flocked to his performances. Like Bernie, a former U.S. presidential candidate, John generated hope, new visions and passionate loyalty from both the in-crowd and people on the sidelines. Like Joan, he denounced wrongdoing and exposed the cowardice of the authorities of his day — and they both lost their lives for it. But with all of that, John claimed to be nothing more than the warm-up act to the mysterious One who was to come.

From the very start, Jesus came across as amazingly different from John. He was

nowhere near as much of a scene-stopper and rarely preached fire and brimstone. In fact, according to the Gospel of John, when the Baptist pointed Jesus out to his disciples, instead of calling him a superhero or lion, he said, "Behold the lamb of God."

With John as the first act, people must have been expecting a spectacular follow-up. But our readings present Jesus in a very humble light. Luke can hardly bear to admit that Jesus joined the crowds who immersed themselves in John's message and were baptized by him.

When John had been arrested, Jesus went off to pray. His prayer didn't lead him to take up John's mantle, nor to be a fiery prophet like Jeremiah who would build up, tear down, destroy and overthrow. Through prayer, Jesus discerned the call to be the servant Son of God, to establish justice so gently that he would not even break a bruised reed much less shout on the streets.

Early Christians found an image of Jesus in Isaiah's description of God's servant who "had no majestic bearing to catch our eye, no beauty to draw us to him." As *Gaudium et Spes* puts it, "He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved" (#22). Like us, he had to seek the will of God in his life and decide how to live out his vocation. He had no script but the Scriptures, no guide but God's love.

When we contemplate Jesus around the time of his baptism, he is surprisingly more accessible and easier to imitate than John the Baptist. John seemed to move without doubts or hesitation. The Gospels tell us nothing about how he prayed. In contrast, we observe Jesus moving in a rhythm of action and reflection, as well as preaching and even allowing people like his mother and the Syrophenician woman to adjust his course of action.

The evangelists tell us that he took time to pray and would go off by himself for longer periods of communing with God before key events in his life. Although Jesus went to John for baptism, his commitment and course of action flowed from his prayerful encounters with the Father. Jesus was the model of Ignatius of Loyola's ideal of a contemplative in action. He prayed about how he should act and acted on what he heard in prayer.

What can we take away from today's celebration of the Baptism of the Lord? First, we can celebrate the reality that our baptism links us to Christ and to all who have

gone before us in faith. At a time when legal papers have become so important for determining status, we can claim our baptismal certificate as our principal identity card. It tells us to whom we belong and to what we are called.

Jesus' response to his baptism reminds us that the ceremony is but one tiny moment, the meaning of which is determined by how we live it out. Observing him, we realize that baptism does not give us a status but a mission. To discern that mission, we too must pray and listen to the Scriptures.

God will continue to send vibrant characters like John to remind us of the Spirit's fire. After those prophets wake us up, we will be called to prayer as was Jesus. Then, like Jesus, the first message we will hear is that we too are God's beloved. That love will then send us into the mission that only we can accomplish in our own day.

### **ISAIAH 42:1-4, 6-7**

Anyone who reads both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures can note how important the prophet Isaiah was to the writers of the Gospels and letters. Isaiah's songs of the Suffering Servant (See Isaiah 42, 49, 50, 52-53) were among the passages that best helped them understand Christ's mission and how it was fulfilled in his passion. Knowing that, we can be fairly safe in assuming that Jesus too found great inspiration in Isaiah.

Jesus' world was primarily oral rather than literate. Because of that, people who heard the Scriptures proclaimed would remember what they heard more clearly than most contemporary people who can look it up in a book. The words of psalms would have been as familiar to practicing Jews as popular song lyrics are to people in our world. The psalms and canticles would have shaped ancient people's imaginations, hopes and expectations just as effectively as songs and jingles shape ours. (Think of the 2013 phenomenon "Let It Go," the song from the movie Frozen, or the popularity of Frank Sinatra's signature tune, "My Way.")

With that in mind, we might consider how the passage of Isaiah we hear today influenced Jesus' self-concept. Knowing that he was like us in all things but sin, we can assume that Jesus had to discern and choose how he would live out his vocation. The Hebrew Scriptures, the law and the prophets, offered him a variety of options. As son of David, he could have seen himself as a warrior-king who would lead his people to victory over their enemies. That would have satisfied the revolutionaries among his followers.

Taking Moses as his model, he could have felt called to lead his people into a new land where they could start over again. That would have been a variation on the alternative offered by the Essenes who formed their own deeply committed communities, hoping that God would soon send the savior. Jesus also could have chosen the role of a prophet like John the Baptist who preached repentance and an ascetical way of life.

Jesus seemed to draw from each of those options, but he seemed to take more from Isaiah than from any other scriptural model or source. Knowing how Jesus used to go off by himself to pray, we can imagine him mulling over the phrases of Isaiah 42 until they formed his inner consciousness.

God's declaration, "Here is my servant whom I uphold. ... I have grasped him by the hand," may have been the phrase that led him to teach his disciples to say, "Give us this day..." and "Thy will be done." We can easily see the connection between Jesus' statement, "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30), and God's proclamation in Isaiah, "upon [him] I have put my spirit." When it came to a pattern for carrying out his mission, Isaiah says "a bruised reed he shall not break." Jesus told his disciples not to pull the weeds from the wheat field, lest they root up something good along with the bad (Matthew 13:24-30).

Today's selection from Isaiah explains that the essence of the servant's vocation is to establish justice among the nations. That justice was not a judicial sentence of reward and punishment, but something more like an atmosphere of peace among peoples. In his text on Isaiah (NIV Application Commentary Series), Scripture scholar John Oswalt explains that justice in this sense is the opposite of chaos. Justice creates an atmosphere of mutual understanding and safety. It becomes a way of life that promotes union among people, between people and God, and with all of creation. The vocation to bring about the victory of justice can be accomplished because the servant has received God's own spirit.

When we contemplate Jesus meditating on this passage, we can find in it the roots of his mysticism, his sense of union with God. That should remind us that he also prayed for us: "May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us" (John 17:21).

This selection from Isaiah offers us both the opportunity to understand Jesus and to understand our own vocation as his beloved disciples, servants upon whom God is

pleased to send the Spirit.

### **PSALM 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10**

This psalm celebrates the world of justice and peace that God's servants are commissioned and empowered to establish in the world. The opening stanza, like a gathering song, is a summons to worship, a call to sing of God's glory. It ends with the instruction that we should put on our Sunday best so that our dress can match our praise.

The second stanza offers a meditation on peace as God's gift in situations of chaos symbolized by the waters. It envisions God's voice as both strong and wondrously attractive. The refrain reminds us again that peace is God's basic offer to us.

The final stanza recapitulates two key elements of the message. First, God's voice, stronger than any other, calls forth a response of praise. Secondly, God is beyond all the chaos; God's rule is the only one that is true. All of the verses come together as a song of thanks for the peace that God's promises to provide.

### **ACTS 10:34-38**

This short selection from Acts fits the feast of the day because it mentions Jesus' baptism. In context, it is part of the homily Peter preached when he discovered that Cornelius and his pagan household were capable of being Christians. Like the evangelists, Peter circumvents the detail that Jesus asked John for baptism. Instead, he explains that God's unique saving activity in their days began after John's ministry and that God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power.

Theologically, this selection underlines two interrelated points: God's impartiality and the relation between the Holy Spirit and baptism. The first, the fact that God does not favor people of any race, gender or creed, is the main point of the passage. Peter's homily is like a personal theological reflection through which he is coming to grips with the universality of the message of Jesus.

The struggle to accept Gentiles equally with Jews in the Christian movement was one of the greatest theological and sociological challenges faced by the early church. It was surpassed only by the struggle to understand a suffering, crucified and risen Messiah. The church still struggles with those two pillars of faith as we are tempted repeatedly by the desire for power and our proclivity to discriminate on the

basis of gender, race or status.

Jesus' baptism was not the subject of Peter's sermon; he mentioned it simply as a part of a different topic. Because of that, his casual connection of baptism and God's anointing of Jesus with the Spirit and power indicates how clearly the early church understood Jesus' baptism as the starting point of his ministry and sense of vocation.

### **LUKE 3:15-16, 21-22**

Luke opens the body of his Gospel with the preaching of John the Baptist. (Chapters 1 and 2 — the infancy narratives — are considered a prologue to the Gospel proper.) John's passionate preaching reverberated in the minds and hearts of crowds who found him both entertaining and personally challenging. Those who chose to be baptized became immersed in his message and happily convinced that God was up to something big in their time.

John was such a well-known figure that the Gospel writers could not ignore him. In fact, they took great care to situate him as secondary to Jesus. (Acts 19:1-6 shows us that as late as the time of Paul, there was some confusion about the difference between Jesus and John.) With popular confusion about the two of them, it was an embarrassment to the early disciples that Jesus was baptized by John. To remedy that, each evangelist framed the story to demonstrate that Jesus was never really John's disciple.

To that end, they presented Jesus' baptism as the occasion for God's Spirit to descend upon him. It is easy to hear echoes of Genesis 1 as God tells Jesus, "with you I am well pleased." This gives us a subtle but powerful hint that the new creation is beginning, it situates John as the last and greatest of the old, and Jesus the bringer of the new.

All the Gospels are careful to portray John as the precursor rather than as Jesus' teacher or rival. Mark, the first evangelist, sets the pattern by saying that as soon as John had baptized Jesus, God put the seal of approval on Jesus by sending the Spirit to him and calling him the beloved Son. Matthew emphasizes the inequality between John and Jesus by having John protest that he should not presume to baptize Jesus, but vice versa. Luke avoids even depicting Jesus' baptism, but simply refers to it as something that happened in the past.

Although Luke doesn't mention John's martyrdom, his storyline suggests that John's arrest changed the scene for Jesus. After the baptism and John's arrest, Luke says that Jesus was praying when the heavens opened, the Spirit descended upon him and he heard the voice of God call him his beloved Son. The quote, mentioned in all three synoptic Gospels, is a clear reference to Isaiah 42.

When we look at today's readings together, we get a picture of Jesus discovering his vocation as Son and servant of God. The descent of the Spirit and God's message combined to tell Jesus that he was called to something different from John's mission. The fact that the Gospels record this revelation gives us the sense that Jesus, like every other human being, had to seek God's will in his life.

Jesus had no script but the Scriptures to lead him through discernment. Listening to the Gospel in conjunction with the selection from Isaiah, we get a sense of where Jesus found the inspiration for his vocation to establish God's justice on earth. Unlike John who preached of God's impending, frightening judgment, Jesus heard the call to be a gentle light for the world.

Luke's depiction of Jesus around the time of his baptism portrays him as a man of prayer above all else. His identity and his mission flowed from his relationship with the God who called him the beloved Son. As the Gospel of John makes clear, Jesus dedicated himself to doing the Father's will in all things. That is symbolized by the descent of the Spirit and later explanations that he was filled with the spirit of God.

Jesus discovered and chose to follow a vocation that grew out of his Jewish tradition. As his followers, we are invited to follow his example. Ritualizing our commitment is only a small step. Baptism is our entry point into a life of contemplation and action, a life of discovering and spreading God's great love for humankind.

## **Planning: The Baptism of the Lord**

By Lawrence Mick

The feast of the Baptism of the Lord brings an end to the Christmas season. Keep the Christmas décor for today but change it after Masses this weekend. Monday brings us back to Ordinary Time.

As with the feast of the Holy Family, today's celebration offers options for the first two readings and the psalm. You can use the readings from Cycle A or those from Cycle C. In either case, the Gospel comes from Cycle C, the passage from Luke.

If you use the first reading from Isaiah 40 (Cycle C), parishioners may think for a moment that we are back in Advent when they hear: "A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord'" (Luke 3:4). That could be an easy hook for the presider to remind people that this feast is still part of the Advent-Christmas season. The Baptism of the Lord was once part of the celebration of Epiphany, since both events are seen as manifestations of Christ to the world. As the Isaiah reading puts it, "Here is your God! Here comes with power the Lord God."

Baptism is the major theme of the day, of course, so think about how you can highlight it. If you have infants ready for baptism, this would be a great day to celebrate that sacrament within the Mass or Masses of the feast. If you don't, you might begin the Mass with a sprinkling rite instead of the penitential rite as a way of reminding the assembly of their own baptisms.

This might also be a good day to focus on our common responsibility for the New Evangelization. In many dioceses, the number of people coming to Christ through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has been decreasing for many years. One reason, perhaps, is that fewer Catholics are marrying in the church, and non-Catholic spouses often decided to enter the church before or after the wedding. In any case, we need to find other ways to invite people to join the church and to embrace the Christian faith. That cannot be left to the religious professionals, since most people come to faith through a relationship with a friend or family member. Rejoicing in the gift of faith and the call to baptism in our own lives should lead us to find ways to share that gift with others, whether in the family, in the neighborhood, at work or wherever we go.

Preachers might focus on one or both of these themes (they are easily linked, of course, since evangelization leads to baptism). Planners can compose petitions that lift up these concerns, and musicians can choose a selection of hymns that combine Christmas themes and a focus on mission to bring others to Christ.

## **Prayers: The Baptism of the Lord**



By Joan De Merchant

## **Introduction**

This Christmas season ends with a beginning — we celebrate Jesus' baptism and initiation into his ministry. The ancient promise of justice to Israel is fulfilled in him whose mission, empowered by the Spirit, will focus on peace and justice. Our baptism mirrors his as the beginning of what we are called to be and do. We are all empowered to be instruments of peace and justice and to invite others to join us.

## **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you were baptized by John and empowered by the Holy Spirit: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you were called by God to bring forth justice and peace: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you likewise call and empower us through our own baptism: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Let us pray now about the work we are called to do and the concerns of the world.

**Minister** For the church: that it may vigorously embrace and celebrate all cultures and people across the earth, we pray:

- For those still longing for justice and peace in violence-ridden neighborhoods, substandard housing, refugee camps or at our nation's borders, we pray:
- For a peaceful and just resolution to the struggle between Israel and Palestine and within conflict-torn nations in Latin America and the Middle East; and for those who strive for diplomatic solutions, we pray:
- For those whose lives have been adversely affected by those who call themselves Christians but do not act as followers of Christ and for those who struggle to understand the interface between the Gospel and complex social issues or politics, we pray:
- For those who use religion especially Christianity as a weapon for persecuting others, especially people of other faiths or those who interpret the Gospel differently, we pray:

- For a commitment to creatively share our faith with family members and friends, co-workers and neighbors through our words, actions and parish ministries, we pray:

**Presider** Gracious God, at his baptism, you called Jesus, to be a new, living sign of your justice and peace. Give us the courage to live our own baptismal call and to evangelize others to join us. We ask this in the name of Jesus, your beloved Son. Amen.

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