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“There is a baptism with which I must be baptized. And how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:49).

To understand Jesus’ anguish, we need to remember what baptism is. The act of going down into the water is symbolic of death. We die to ourselves or to our former selves, in order to rise up again to a new, transformed life. Jesus foresaw not a symbolic death but an actual one, in order to accomplish his mission.

His death on the cross accomplished the transformative purpose of both Passover and Exodus—the liberation of God’s people from slavery to sin and the completion of their journey to the Promised Land of new life with God.

When Jesus began preaching and healing, he immediately encountered resistance not only from religious leaders but from the deeper entrenched forces within human nature itself that cling to control and are driven by competition and fear. The demoniacs that reacted violently to him in the synagogues were manifestations of the baleful Power he had encountered in the desert identified as “Satan,” the Adversary.

When Jesus emerged from the Judean wilderness as the “Suffering Servant” after his long fast and time of testing, he knew that Satan would shadow him and reappear to oppose him at the end of his ministry. He would endure a baptism of fire that would cost him his life in exchange for the lives of God’s people. In today’s reading, he anguishes over this final, decisive encounter and wishes it were over.

The battle between good and evil is not only between God and Evil. It runs down through the middle of every human heart, vying for our allegiance, testing us to the core and forcing us to choose. Jesus knew that the radical demands of the Gospel would cause divisions within families, between generations, dividing parents from their children, pitting neighbors against one another in ideological camps and religious enclaves.

When we pray the Our Father, we ask God to “lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” Jesus has gone before us, and the battle is already won in one sense. As Paul wrote in yesterday’s first reading, “Where sin abounds, grace abounds even more.” But we must choose to align our minds and hearts with God to benefit from that grace.

We were baptized into Christ, and the path to God, our source and destination, is already visible. But there will be other baptisms along the way, baptisms of courage, baptisms of sorrow and loss we must face without losing faith. Day by day, we live our baptism by dying with Christ in order to rise with him, surrendering ourselves for the sake of others, in service, sacrifice and love.

There is no other way home, and even as we know anxiety, we rejoice to know that we are with Jesus and in excellent company because of one another.

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