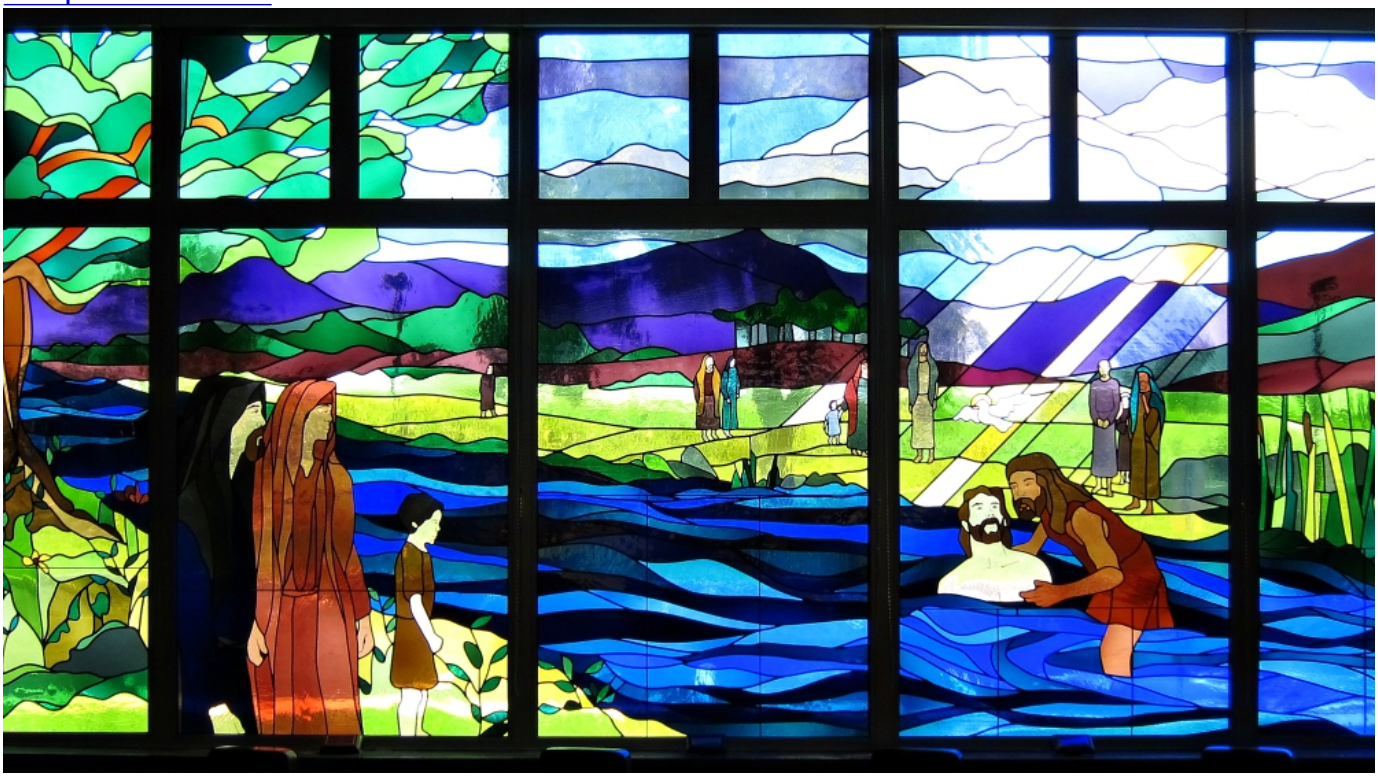
Spirituality
Scripture for Life



"The Baptism in the Jordan," depicted in stained-glass at St. John Neumann Church in Sunbury, Ohio (Wikimedia Commons/Nheyob)



by Sr. Mary M. McGlone

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January 11, 2020

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Matthew knew this story was scandalous: Jesus asked John to baptize him! Imagine what John's disciples did with this when they debated with Peter and the gang. (It's incomprehensible that the two groups of disciples didn't run into each other now and then — and the guys we know from Jesus' company would hardly have avoided the opportunity to compare their respective teachers.) The New Testament never presents John as a disciple of Jesus, but this story makes it look like Jesus is playing second fiddle.

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

January 12, 2020

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-38

Matthew 3:13-17

"*Me* baptize *you*?" asks John. Matthew portrays John as humbly reluctant to baptize Jesus. Scripture scholars suggest that Matthew used that detail to diminish the shocking picture of Jesus submitting to John.

It may be that Matthew wrote as he did to defend Jesus' preeminence, but contemplation of the story leads us beyond comparing the two in relation to one another. In fact, the Gospels' admission that Jesus accepted John's baptism turns out to be the first revelation of how Jesus presented himself as Emmanuel: an unimaginable, exceptionally humble, incarnation of God in the midst of humanity.

The narration of Jesus submitting to John's baptism is a story that fleshes out what the hymn from Philippians teaches through its lyrics, that Christ, "though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God something to be grasped" (Philippians 2:6).

Jesus' baptism reinforces the message of the Christmas narratives. Jesus' baptism tells us that God's chosen way of being with us is not as an awesome ruler of the

universe, but as one who chooses solidarity with us in all our weakness. Jesus' baptism depicts Emmanuel as one of us.

Jesus Emmanuel freely chooses the confines of human existence in order to lead us into all that we were created to be. This is the scandal of Christianity; we are the one world religion that conceives of God as incarnate, sharing all our limitations in order to reveal limitless love.

Orthodox Christians and Oriental Catholics use this Gospel for the feast of the Epiphany. They interpret the astounding mystery of Jesus' decision to submit to John's baptism as the first revelation of who Jesus is and thus, what God is like. This scene is also the first depiction of God as Trinity. Here we encounter Jesus as Emmanuel, the Spirit who descends on him and the voice of God affirming him. The Trinity is manifested in the humble scene of Jesus submitting to John's baptism.

This is what Jesus' baptism reveals *to us*. At the same time, knowing that Jesus shared our human limitations invites us to contemplate what the baptism revealed to him as he began his mission. The Gospels tell us that John began his preaching before Jesus appeared in public. The baptism is Jesus' first public appearance. Matthew presents Jesus as seeking the will of God.

As a faithful Jew, Jesus perceived that John was a prophet. Jesus' baptism was a proclamation of faith that God was up to something in their midst and that John was an integral part of it. In asking for baptism, Jesus was seeking and submitting to God's will among John's disciples.

The scene of the baptism shows how Jesus' discernment of the will of God opened him to hear God's confirmation of his actions. Matthew draws a dramatic scene, saying that as "he came up from the water, the heavens were opened for him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him." That was Jesus' interior experience, the heavens opened *for him* and *he* saw the Spirit of God descending.

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Jesus knew his Scriptures. His experience of the Spirit revealed that he was called to be the servant of God Isaiah had prophesied. The voice, heard again at the

Transfiguration, came as a public confirmation: Jesus was the longed-for son of Israel, the son in whom God was well pleased.

What does this say to us? The scandal of Christianity is God's limitless solidarity with us. Emmanuel is "god with us" in every circumstance: in hope and love, in weakness and sin, disgrace and desperation. The way to union with this God necessarily passes through practicing the kind of presence Jesus showed us.

If we wish to know God, we can only do so through solidarity, through sharing one another's need and weakness so profoundly that we can also genuinely share one another's joys. Then we will know God because God will be acting in and through us.

Jesus accepted baptism in union with us. Our baptism is a call and invitation to union with God and all of God's own. Jesus' baptism was a sign of his communion with us. Ours calls us into communion with God and one another.

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A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 27, 2019-Jan 9, 2020** print issue under the headline: Baptism into Emmanuel.