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“The voice of the Lord is over the waters” (Psalm 29:3).

The Baptism of the Lord

Isa 42:1-4, 6-7; Ps 29; Acts 10:34-38; Matt 3:13-17

Photographers look for “decisive moments,” images that tell the whole story.

Matthew, writing for a mainly Jewish audience, focuses particularly on backlighting his narratives with past events and prophecies he believed were fulfilled in Jesus.

The dramatic scene at Jesus’ baptism invokes several key biblical moments related to water, beginning with Creation itself, when God speaks over the watery wastes to bring forth the world. Then, the receding waters of the flood when a dove appears to signal a new beginning for the world in peace. Then, the waters of Exodus parting to rescue the Hebrews from slavery and death. And finally, the opening of the sky as a sign that prophecy has resumed and God’s favor is restored after a long period of divine silence.

The Baptism of Jesus is presented as a decisive moment in salvation history. This is Jesus’ first public appearance as an adult in Matthew’s Gospel. He comes to the Jordan where John is baptizing as a sign of conversion in preparation for the Messiah. John recognizes Jesus and at first resists his request for baptism, then accedes when Jesus says it is necessary to fulfill God’s righteousness, a rich theme in the bible having to do with the restoration of “right relationships,” the ultimate purpose of the Law, especially the First Commandment of love.

When Jesus is baptized, a theophany occurs, a revelation of God as the skies open, a dove descends and a Voice is heard saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Divine favor is being restored to Creation in Jesus. In his person, both the human Jesus of Nazareth and the Son of God, righteousness is being poured out on all those who receive and believe in him. After a time in the desert rejecting the temptations of Satan to choose bread, spectacle and earthly power to accomplish his mission, Jesus begins his public ministry of preaching and healing.

Our own baptisms are also decisive moments when our lives dovetail with the identity and mission of Jesus in a ritual of spiritual intimacy that redefines who we are. Baptism in the early church was the first and most important of all the sacraments, even more than the Eucharist. New members were incorporated into the risen body of Christ on the eve of Easter, submerged in water, clothed in white, anointed with oil and given a lighted candle. Their human lives were opened to a divine destiny as they joined the Beloved Community sent forth to witness right relationships that restore the world to God's love and love for neighbor.

Today's solemnity of the Baptism of the Lord is also a celebration of our baptisms, a reminder of who we are and why we are in the world. The joy of witnessing the baptisms of infants during the year or at the highpoint of the liturgy on Holy Saturday when new adult members are welcomed in the church unites us with believers around the world going back to the first century. If we plan to take up the challenges that will determine the future of the planet and the return of right relationship to our nation in 2020, there is no better place to start than by rekindling the light of Christ and the anointing we received the day we were baptized.

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