Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17).

The Baptism of the Lord

Is 42:1-4, 6-7 or Acts 10:34-38; Mt 3:13-17

Today’s feast celebrates the meaning and implications of your baptism. If you were baptized as an infant, it may seem like only a ritual moment distant in time. What does it have to do with you now? The answer is, just about everything. As important as your actual birth, the moment you were baptized into relationship with Jesus, the crucified and risen Christ, you were claimed within the community of his body, the church. This sacramental act of incorporation — with water, oil, light and a special garment — set you on a trajectory toward eternity as a child of God, commissioning you to live your life in a specific way to share in the life in the Trinity.

Yet even this language, so biblical and theological, makes baptism seem even more distant from our ordinary lives. What defines me today? I might say, my family history, marriage, vocation, professional associations, social circle, hobbies and interests, and, perhaps, my parish affiliation. But these are external identifiers that only clothe my intimate, personal and interior sense of self. It is my hidden self that baptism transforms. Baptism is God’s gift to me, but free participation in my life in Christ determines whether it will have its full effect.

Jesus went from Galilee down to Judea to encounter John, who was baptizing in the Jordan River. Some scholars say that John was a member of the Essene Community, radical purists who lived celibate and ascetic lives in community near the Dead Sea and practiced repeated ritual washings to prepare for God’s decisive coming to judge an evil world. John’s baptism offered people cleansing from sin before imminent judgment.

Jesus receives John’s baptism, but the evangelist changes its meaning to reflect a new relationship with God and the beginning of a new covenant in love. As Jesus comes up out of the water from John’s baptism of repentance, the sky opens and the Spirit of God descends on him like a dove (think of the creation story or the bird and rainbow in the story of Noah’s Ark). A voice declares that Jesus is God’s beloved Son.

After his baptism, Jesus goes west from the Jordan River into the wilderness to grasp the full meaning of this revelation. He will emerge from the wilderness after a time of resisting intense temptations to use power to accomplish his mission, choosing instead to be God’s suffering servant, who absorbs evil with forgiveness and has only the call of love to transform the world.

If you were being baptized today (and it is a daily decision to let God’s presence shape our self-consciousness), you would hear spiritually the same voice that

claimed Jesus: “You are my beloved child with whom I am well pleased.” Whatever other identities or personas you have allowed to claim you would need to sort themselves out, even fall away as illusions or addictions that must be shed in order for your true self to emerge.

Baptism is important because it marks the beginning. The beginning is important because it determines the direction we are going, and this determines our destination. A small difference at the beginning is a big difference at the end. God is both our source and destiny. Jesus is the path between baptism and glory. To embrace your identity is the most important decision you will ever make. So, make it today, tomorrow, and the next day, and it will show you who you really are.