

Jan. 8, 2023. Mt. 3:13-17, Isaiah 42:1-9

The Baptism of the Lord

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ENTERING THE SCENE:

We come to the banks of the Jordan in today's reading. This is the historic site of crossing over into the promise. But before we can cross over, we must look within and see whatever needs to be changed in us, so that we can really leave the old behind and enter into the new. It took Jesus most of his life to come to this moment of decision. One wonders why on this particular day he set down his tools, took off his apron, and made his way to this place of decisions. Was he agonizing over the way the people were being held back from God's love by belief's that got in the way? Did he know that from now on, things would take on a momentum that could not be reversed? There must have been some powerful things happening inside his head and heart that day as he walked out to the Jordan and John

Mt. 3: 13-17

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be

baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. 16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Jesus has accepted God's unconditional love so completely that God announces his pleasure in him. Do you accept this same love that God has for you so as to give God pleasure?

PRAYER: Brother Jesus, you never doubted the Esther's love for you. I yearn for this same security as I struggle with all the mixed messages labeled "love" in my life. Too many of them seem to have strings attached. My mind knows that any human love will necessarily fall short of the Father's love. So help me as I try to relax into that same assurance that you experienced. Only that will give me the wisdom and courage to love unconditionally as well. Amen.

WORD STUDY AND QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

JORDAN: The Jordan is a boundary between one land and another. We hear of it beginning way back in Genesis 13. It marked the place where the people went into the promise of God.

What makes the Jordan such a perfect place for the baptism of Jesus? Is Jesus making a crossing from one way of being to another with the baptism that day?

JESUS CAME FROM GALILEE: Jesus was already in his advanced middle age for his day by the time he went down to the Jordan to hear John the Baptist.

What do you think happened to motivate Jesus to make that trip that day? When was the last time you struggled with a decision, and then finally made a move to enter into the unknown that would forever make your life different? What do you remember about that time?

BAPTIZED: John's baptism was very different from what we know today. His baptism was a communal event that gave public witness to a person's change of heart.

Could Jesus' decision to finally come out in public with his understanding of God, be seen as a form of a change of heart? How?

JOHN: John excited the people's hopes that God would now re-enter their lives and come to their aid.

If you had been at the Jordan that day, do you think you would have gone down into the water and joined those who were publicly pledging that you were ready to let God work in your life?

DETER: The early church struggled long and hard over the paradox of Jesus' baptism. Since baptism was seen as washing away of sin, it seemed a scandal that Jesus would have needed baptism.

Does it help you to make sense of this paradox by knowing that John resisted Jesus' request? Why do you think that the early church insisted on keeping this troublesome memory?

LET IT BE SO NOW: Jesus tells John to let it be, because it was part of God's plan for him.

How do you think John felt as he went ahead with the ritual? Do you think he had any idea of what would happen?

FULFILL ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS: Matthew insists on fulfilling the scriptures, and Jesus sees his baptism as part of that fulfillment. All the accounts of the Jesus' baptism show him doing the will of the Father.

Why is it important for us to see Jesus as doing God's will? Do you often think of Jesus that way?

CONSENTED: John is complying with God's will as he goes ahead with the ritual.

What lesson is repeated here? Is this a consistent theme throughout the gospels?

WENT UP OUT OF THE WATER: Jesus is baptized; he emerges from under the water with a consciousness that his life will be forever different.

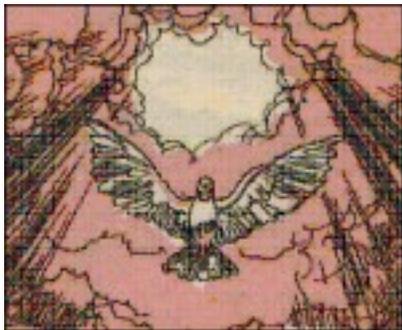
Have you ever had such a defining moment in your life? Do you remember the feelings and questions that you had during that transitional moment?

HEAVEN WAS OPENED: Matthew wants us to remember Is. 63:19 and Ezek. 1:1. One was a prayer that the heavens would open and God's will be revealed, and the other was a time of divine visions.

What words would you use today to talk about such a revelatory event?

SPIRIT OF GOD DESCENDING: First we have the resumption of prophecy with John as a sign that God was re-engaging with humanity. Then we have the image of the dove to make concrete the presence of God. This was during a time when people thought God existed above the earth in the heavens and therefore would need to come 'down' to be with them.

Does this image still work for you today? Do you experience God as 'up there and out there'? If not, how do you image the place where God exists?



DOVE: Once again we reach into our scriptural history (Genesis 1: 2 and 8: 8f), to find help to talk about what was happening that day at the Jordan. The dove also appears in the Protevangelium of James, when a dove flies out of Joseph's rod and lighted upon his head as a sign that he was to wed Mary. It was also featured to convey who was the true king.

Look up Genesis 1:2 and 8:8f and spend some time meditating on what was happening there that could help you understand what God was doing in Jesus.

LIGHTING ON HIM: It was thought that a dove would only land on someone who was at perfect peace within them.

How do you identify someone who is at peace? Why would the people need this confirmation as they struggled with the paradox of the baptism of Jesus?

VOICE FROM HEAVEN: From somewhere beyond himself, Jesus hears from God. This enables him to know his true identity and move out into what God has in store for his life.

How do you "hear from God"? In what ways does this happen in and for you? Where does your "voice" come from?

SON WHOM I LOVE /WELL PLEASED: In Psalm 2:7 we hear "You are my son; this day I have begotten you. Jesus now knows that he is of God for God. This consciousness makes Jesus able to live into God's plan for his life.

Do you know that you are a beloved of God? What deters you from this awareness? In those moments when you are conscious of this unfailing love, are you more able to say yes to God's plan in your life?

PARALLEL TEXTS:

Mt. 3: 13 // Mk. 1: 9-11; Lk. 3:21f; Jn. 1: 31-34; **Mt. 3:16** // Is. 11:2; **Mt. 3:17** // Mt:12: 18; 17:5; Is. 42:1; 49:3;

OTHER TEXTS OF THE WEEK: Is. 42: 1-7; Ps. 72: 1-7,10-14; Acts 10: 34-38; Mt. 3:13-17;
Revised Common Lectionary: Is. 42: 1-9; Ps. 29; Acts 10: 34-43; Mt. 3: 13-17;

SUPPORTIVE INFORMATION:

To Matt. 3:13 cf. Gospel according to the Hebrews, (in Jerome, *Against Pelagius* III.2)-The mother of the Lord and his brothers said to him, "John the Baptist baptizes for the forgiveness of sins; let us go and be baptized by him." But he said to them, "In what have I sinned that I should go and be baptized by him? Unless, perhaps, what I have just said is a sin of ignorance."

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) mention Jesus' baptism (Matthew and Mark mention that it is by John; Luke does not), but none of them indicates whether it occurred on the western or eastern shore of the Jordan (Mt. 3: 13-17; Mk. 1: 9-11; Lk. 3: 21-22). However, it seems likely that it would have been on the eastern shore. Jesus was coming from Galilee (again, explicit in Matthew and Mark). The ~ normal route through the Decapolis (a group of ten ~Roman cities in the region) from Galilee would bypass a hostile Samaria by crossing the Jordan and proceeding south on the eastern side of the river.

Despite the Madaba map's location of Beth Abara west of the Jordan, many other ancient authorities have the Baptist living and baptizing on the east side of the Jordan. In the early fourth century, Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, crossed the Jordan River and visited the cave where John the Baptist was said to have lived. Eusebius reports that she built a church there.

In about 530 A.D. the archdeacon Theodosius traveled to Palestine as a pilgrim and described a square shaped church built on arched arcades and containing a marble column with an iron cross marking the spot where Jesus was baptized. The church was built on arches to allow water to pass underneath, but it succumbed to the Jordan River's periodic floods and eventually collapsed. The site is east of the Jordan.

An early Christian tradition associated Jesus' crossing of the Jordan with an Old Testament parallel: Just as Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan into the Promised Land, so Jesus would cross the Jordan to lead the New Israel to salvation. Pilgrim tradition identifies the same site on the Jordan for both Joshua's crossing and Jesus' baptism. This tradition, as we will see, will help us identify the recent archaeological excavations as "Bethany beyond the Jordan." Khouri, Rami. *Where John Baptized*. www.biblicalarchaeology.org. Jan. 2005. Pg.39.



Pouring out the Jordan from a jug, at left, a smiling river god of the classical type watches Jesus' baptism. This ivory panel from a casket probably dates to between 425 and 450. It may have originated in Milan or Rome. www.biblereview.org 2002/93. Page 38.

The Gospel of Nicodemus: Chap. XIV.

1 Adam causes Seth to relate what he heard from Michael the archangel, when he sent him to Paradise to entreat God to anoint his head in his sickness. But when the first man our father Adam heard these things, that Jesus was baptized in Jordan," he called out to his son, Seth, and said,

2 Declare to your sons, the patriarchs and prophets, all those things, which thou didst hear from Michael, the archangel, when I sent thee to the gates of Paradise, to entreat God that he would anoint my head when I was sick.

The Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans: Chap. 1, 4. (A letter that asserted that Jesus truly suffered)

Who truly was of the race of David according to the flesh, but the Son of God; truly born of the Virgin, and baptized of John; that so all righteousness might be fulfilled by him.

In a mid 2nd century document called *The Gospel According to the Ebionites* we find in chapter 4 the following: And after many other words it goes on: "After the people had been baptized, Jesus came also, and was baptized by John. And as he came out of the water, the heavens opened, and he saw the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove and entering into him. And a voice was heard from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son, and in you am I well pleased.' And

again, 'this day have I begotten you.' And suddenly a great light shone in that place. And John, seeing him, said, 'Who are you Lord?' Then a voice was heard from heaven, 'This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.' Thereat John fell at his feet and said 'I pray you, Lord, baptize me.' But he would not, saying, 'Suffer it, for thus it is fitting that all should be accomplished.'

Ehrman, Bart. [After the New Testament](#). NY. Oxford Univ. Press. 1998. Pages 135-6.

In his baptismal experience, Jesus discovers anew his identity of Son, together with the continual presence of the Father in his life, the power of the Spirit dwelling in him, his mission to save through suffering, and the message of the Kingdom. In other words, he receives a mystery to be revealed and a mission to be accomplished out of his own deepest identity. Pg. 353.

Olivera, Bernardo, O.C.S.O. [The Search for God: Conference, letters, and homilies](#). Kalamazoo, MI. Cistercian Pub. 2002.

In a work that argues for the rational acceptance of the truth of the gospels called *Origen: Against Celsus* we find: in chapter 40 a mention of the descent of the dove at Jesus' baptism.

Ehrman, Bart. [After the New Testament](#). NY. Oxford Univ. Press. 1998. Page 90.

Stegner, William R. [The Baptism of Jesus: A Story Modeled on the Binding of Isaac](#). Bible Review: Fall 1985, pages 36ff. In this article he sees Jesus and Isaac both as intended sacrifices. Stenger goes on to show how each story is related, yet different. www.biblereview.org

Baptism means immersion. If our mission as Church is to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Spirit, it means to discover and help others to discover the immersion of God in our world, or rather, that our world is immersed in God. Fr. David Bock

It was not forgiveness so much as the dramatic once-for-all conversion which John's baptism symbolized which was new. --William Loader



The early church fathers believed that Jesus purified the Jordan (river of life) when he was baptized in its waters. Robin Jensen asks; [What Are Pagan River Gods Doing in Scenes of Jesus' Baptism?](#) In the Feb. 1993 issue of Bible Review on pages 35ff. This article deals with the timeless human tendency to take what is known and integrate it into what it is learning that is new. (Fifth century mosaic in the Neonian Baptistry in Ravenna, Italy)

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Grana, Janice, Ed. [Images](#). Winona, MN. St. Mary's College Press. 1976.

The Son Who Must Die: Pg 183-4.

Shea, John. [Stories of Faith](#). Chicago. Thomas More Press. 1980,

The Reality of the Future: Page 142.

William Sanford La Sor examines; [Discovering What Jewish Miqva'ot Can Tell Us About Christian Baptism](#) in the Jan/Feb issue of Biblical Archaeology Review, pages 52ff. www.biblicalarchaeology.org

Fresco by Masolino da Panicale (c. 1383-1447).

A newly published Dead Sea Scroll fragment links the baptismal dove with the spirit of God hovering over the waters in Genesis 1:2.

Allison, Jr. Dale C. [The Baptism of Jesus and a New Dead Sea Scroll](#). Biblical Archaeology Review. March/ April 1992. Pages 58ff. www.biblicalarchaeology.org

