

BAPTISM OF THE LORD

YEAR B



Prayer

Isaiah 12:2-3

Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be
afraid,
for the LORD GOD is my
strength and my might;
he has become my
salvation.

With joy you will draw
water from the wells of
salvation.

Reading the Word

Isaiah 55:1-11

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters; and
you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk
without money and
without price.

Why do you spend your
money for that which is
not bread, and your labor
for that which does not
satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and
eat what is good, and
delight yourselves in rich
food. Incline your ear, and
come to me; listen, so
that you may live.

I will make with you an
everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for
David.

See, I made him a witness
to the peoples, a leader
and commander for the
peoples.

See, you shall call nations
that you do not know,
and nations that do not
know you shall run to you,
because of the LORD your
God, the Holy One of
Israel, for he has glorified
you.

Seek the LORD while he
may be found, call upon
him while he is near; let
the wicked forsake their
way, and the unrighteous
their thoughts; let them
return to the LORD, that
he may have mercy on
them, and to our God, for
he will abundantly
pardon.

For my thoughts are not
your thoughts, nor are
your ways my ways, says
the LORD.

For as the heavens are
higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher
than your ways and my
thoughts than your
thoughts.

For as the rain and the
snow come down from
heaven, and do not return
there until they have

FIRST READING

Isaiah 55:1-11

PSALM

Isaiah 12:2-3

SECOND READING

1 John 5:1-9

GOSPEL

Mark 1:7-11

watered the earth, making
it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower
and bread to the eater, so
shall my word be that goes
out from my mouth; it shall
not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish
that which I purpose, and
succeed in the thing for
which I sent it.

1 John 5:1-9

Everyone who believes that
Jesus is the Christ has been
born of God, and everyone
who loves the parent loves
the child. By this we know
that we love the children of
God, when we love God and
obey his commandments. For
the love of God is this, that
we obey his commandments.
And his commandments are
not burdensome, for what-
ever is born of God conquers
the world. And this is the vic-
tory that conquers the world,
our faith. Who is it that con-
quers the world but the one
who believes that Jesus is the
Son of God?

This is the one who came
by water and blood, Jesus
Christ, not with the water
only but with the water and

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the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son.

Mark 1:7-11

John the Baptist proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Hearing the Word

“Baptism of Obedience”

It makes good sense to conclude the Christmas season with the celebration of Jesus’ baptism, as it marks the end of Jesus’ quiet and private life in Nazareth, and the start of his public mission. Baptism always signals a transition; the beginning of something new in response to God’s will and guidance. Hence, it can always be viewed as an act of obedience.

The first reading contains an oracle from a prophet known as the “second Isaiah”. Delivering his oracles towards the end the Babylonian exile, the prophet sought to prepare the people for the end of exile and a future restoration. This was to be the second chance God was giving the Israelites after the destruction they had suffered at the hands of the Babylonians. Isaiah knew that the exile resulted from the breaking of the covenant with God. Therefore, Isaiah aimed to revive the people’s hopes for restoration, but also to help them not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

The prophet began by reporting God’s invitation to partake of the food and drink God was freely and gratuitously offering to all. Food and drink serve as metaphors for what truly nourishes life – hearing and adhering to God’s word. Israel’s past failures to do so brought the ignominy and the devastation of the exile. Isaiah justified his confidence in restoration referring to God’s fidelity to the covenant made with Israel’s forefathers. He evoked God’s covenant with David which contained an everlasting and unconditional promise to preserve David and his descendants, and to give “rest” to the entire Israelite nation (see 2 Sam 7:10-15). God’s choice and commitment to the Israelites made them special, indeed, “the holy one of Israel has glorified” them. Therefore, Isaiah envisioned that, in the near future, this restored covenantal community of Israel would be like a magnet drawing all human-

ity to itself, because all will see God’s presence in Israel’s midst. The sorry fate of the exiles will be dramatically altered. God will transform their condition of humiliation and vulnerability into glory and security.

These high hopes for the future, however, rested on the Israelites “opening their ears” to God’s word. Thus, Isaiah exhorts them to “seek the Lord”, to forsake wickedness and turn away from unrighteousness, as the first steps towards forgiveness and renewal of the broken covenant.

The prophet concludes with a powerful double divine declaration. First, God declared that his ways are inscrutable and unfathomable, infinitely surpassing human thinking and reasoning. God’s reasoning and designs are beyond human comprehension, just as the heavens rise above earth. God has absolute autonomy in all that he does. The people may not comprehend God’s ways, but they must accept God’s will, knowing that his actions are benevolent and stem from his fidelity to the covenant and his love for them.

The second declaration concerns God’s word, whose effectiveness is poignantly described through a comparison with water. Water works its magic falling upon seeds and causing them to sprout. This process is unstoppable. Analogously, nothing can hinder or frustrate the effectiveness of God’s word. God’s will and designs will surely come to fruition, and his word will have its intended effect. These powerful declarations were meant

to reassure the exiles that the restoration which God decreed would inevitably take place. However, the prophet also taught that the key to the restoration and future glory of the nation lies in obedience and adherence to God's will and word.

The second reading summarizes the foundations of Christian belief and practice, as envisioned by John. Everything begins with an acknowledgment of Jesus as the Christ, that is, the God-sent Messiah. Such faith leads the Christian to be "born of God", to belong to God, and to be counted among his people. True faith finds its external expression through love. This outward love-dimension of Christian life is manifest by obedience to God's commandments, which, for John, are all encapsulated in the command to "love one another" (see John 13:34; 15:12). John understands that the love of God expresses itself in the love of others and vice versa; these two kinds of love are inseparable. Love allows believers to "conquer the world", which implies overcoming the powers of unbelief, ignorance, and, above all, hate. Christianity is an all-encompassing lifestyle, which begins with an act of faith in Jesus Christ, accompanied by the practice of love. Love establishes and maintains believers' unbreakable union with God and one another.

The second part of the reading provides a succinct presentation of God as the Trinity. First, Jesus is described as the one who "came by water and blood". This phrase refers to his earthly ministry which

started with his baptism and concluded on the cross. The second person, the Holy Spirit, testifies to the effectiveness and success of Jesus' salvific work by continuing to empower and animate believers to persevere in faith and love. Ultimately, however, the mission of Jesus and work of the Holy Spirit bear testimony to God's love and his salvific intent for humanity. By saving and then uniting believers to himself by the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, God fulfilled his own commandment of love. Christian life, therefore, is a matter of believing in Jesus, and responding to God's love by obeying his supreme commandment of love. Believers are baptized into God by professing their faith in Jesus and the practice of love.

The Gospel passage first concentrates on the mission and identity of John the Baptist. The text explicitly states that John was a precursor of someone with greater power and dignity, implying Jesus. The greater power of Jesus is shown through the baptism he would bring. While John baptized with water for purification and repentance, Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. This refers to the future outpouring of the Holy Spirit which transformed Jesus' timid followers into zealous and powerful evangelizers who would carry Jesus' message to the whole world. John's statement about untying Jesus' sandals refers to a traditional service performed by servants for their masters; thus, John acknowledges himself as Jesus' servant.

Jesus' acceptance of John's baptism does not contradict or diminish his greater importance and dignity. Baptism of John was meant for repentance, which means "turning one's life around". Jesus accepted John's baptism, not to have his sins forgiven, but as a sign of his acceptance and readiness to begin his mission in the world. He turned away from his quiet, ordinary life in Nazareth, and began the public ministry. Such understanding of Jesus' baptism finds support in what happened next. In response to Jesus' baptism a divine voice declared him, "my son, the Beloved". God thus provided confirmation that Jesus came into the world to carry out the work entrusted to him by the Father, and that his baptism was a public declaration of his obedience to God will.

Celebration of Jesus's baptism brings into the spotlight the importance of obedience to God's will. Obedience to God's word, mediated through the prophets and the Law, was an initial step towards the restoration, and a guarantee of future glory for the exiled Israelites. For John, obedience to God's command of love was the basic and necessary condition of belonging to him. To love meant to be "baptized" into the communion with God and others. Jesus' baptism reflected his decision to accept to play his part in God's project to save the world, even though it would lead him to the cross. All who accept to obey God's will, often difficult and costly, can be said to undergo a baptism

of obedience. Doing so, they demonstrate that their hearts are filled with such trust and confidence as are reflected in the words of the Psalmist, "I will trust, and I will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might."

Listening to the Word of God

A thought-provoking quote attributed to Dietrich Bonhoeffer reads, "one act of obedience is better than one hundred sermons". A person who is faithfully obedient to God is a walking sermon. The lives of obedient people inspire and, at the same time, challenge. Such persons embody the message of the Gospel.

Jesus's decision to submit himself to the baptism of John appears to be a theological puzzle, especially when one considers the fact that it was a baptism meant for sinners. In a pool of water with sinners walking in and out, a voice from heaven singled out one person and declared: "You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you" (Mark 1:11). The sonship of Jesus was expressed in its fullest sense by his total obedience to the Father.

The public ministry of Jesus began with a "baptism of obedience" and ended with the "crucifixion of obedience". From start to finish, it was all about obedience. By his pursuit of obedience to the will of the Father, Jesus has revealed the path that leads to life and happiness. It is one of "doing whatever the Lord says".

Not all who have been baptized with water subscribe to a "baptism of obedience". Many are willing to offer almost any kind of sacrifice except the sacrifice of obedience. Obedience

appears too risky in the eyes of some people for it demands a change of life. For such persons, prayer is a request for God to do their will and not a submission to the will of God. Yet, obedience is the defining character of a true Christian. It is not simply a virtue; it is the test of all other virtues. Like gold passing through the furnace, all other virtues are tested by the virtue of obedience.

A proverb said to be of Kenyan origin reads, "one who refuses to obey cannot command". The depth of our impact in society is measured by the strength of our obedience to God. It is in learning to listen that we can speak. We may have many action plans in mind but it is expedient that we seek and actualize God's action plan at any given moment. An obedient person wields an invisible rod of authority.

When a lifeguard jumps into dangerous waters, it is not because he wants to wash away bodily dirt but to save those who are drowning. He risks his life to save those who are at risk. That is what Christ has done by his baptism. This is good news for every sinner in every generation. Let everyone who is drowning in sin know that in Jesus, we have found a reliable lifeguard; we have found a saviour.

Proverb

"One who refuses to obey cannot command."

Action

Self-examination

Do I consider what the Word of God is saying before I take any major action in my life? Am I open to the will of God when I stand to pray?

Am I inclined to twist the will of God to fit my own personal agenda?

Response to God

I come into a sacred space and sit quietly before the Lord. Over and over again, I say with deep sincerity to the Lord, "Do with me whatever pleases you". I rise up from prayer determined to put into practice whatever the Word of God enjoins me to do.

Response to your World

What would be my "baptism of obedience"? I identify a way through which I could implement this idea in my life and act accordingly. In obedience to the revealed will of God, we reach out to the marginalized in society. We extend a hand of friendship to persons suffering from stigmatization either on account of their ill-health or their socio-economic status.

Prayer

Eternal Father, in you we place our trust, and we shall never be disappointed. In your holy will lies our peace and salvation.

Soften our hearts with your grace, that we may be swift to do whatever you tell us. For the sake of Christ, we pray. Amen.