

Baptism of the Lord

Year C



FIRST READING
Isaiah 40:1–5, 9–11

PSALM
Psalm 104:1b–4, 24–25, 27–30

SECOND READING
Titus 2:11–14, 3:4–7

GOSPEL
Luke 3:15–16, 21–22

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PRAYER

Psalm 104:1b–4, 24–25, 27–30

Bless the LORD, O my soul.
O LORD my God, you are very great.
You are clothed
with honor and majesty,
wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
you set the beams
of your chambers on the waters,
you make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind,
you make the winds your messengers,
fire and flame your ministers.
O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.
These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them,
they gather it up;
when you open your hand,
they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face,
they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath,
they die and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit,
they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.

READING THE WORD

First Reading

Isaiah 40:1–5, 9–11

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received
from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.
A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness
prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill
be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord
shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."
Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Second Reading

Titus 2:11–14, 3:4–7

For the grace of God has appeared,
bringing salvation to all, training
us to renounce impiety and world-
ly passions, and in the present age
to live lives that are self-controlled,

upright, and godly, while we wait
for the blessed hope and the man-
ifestation of the glory of our great
God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it
is who gave himself for us that he
might redeem us from all iniquity
and purify for himself a people of
his own who are zealous for good
deeds.

But when the goodness and loving
kindness of God our Savior ap-
peared, he saved us, not because of
any works of righteousness that we
had done, but according to his mer-
cy, through the water of rebirth and
renewal by the Holy Spirit. This
Spirit he poured out on us richly
through Jesus Christ our Savior, so
that, having been justified by his
grace, we might become heirs ac-
cording to the hope of eternal life.

Gospel

Luke 3:15–16, 21–22

As the people were filled with ex-
pectation, and all were questioning
in their hearts concerning John,
whether he might be the Messiah,
John answered all of them by say-
ing, "I baptize you with water; but
one who is more powerful than I
is coming; I am not worthy to un-
tie the thong of his sandals. He will
baptize you with the Holy Spirit
and fire.

Now when all the people were bap-
tized, and when Jesus also had been
baptized and was praying, the heav-
en was opened, and the Holy Spirit
descended upon him in bodily form
like a dove. And a voice came from
heaven, "You are my Son, the Be-
loved; with you I am well pleased."

HEARING THE WORD

“Out of Sadness”

The Christmas season concludes with the celebration of Jesus' baptism. This event marks the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, which will culminate in his death and resurrection. The readings of this feast anticipate the significance which Jesus' life will have, presenting a journey from sadness to joy, which God makes possible by his gracious acts accomplished by Jesus, his beloved Son.

The year 586 B.C. was a tragic one, with the destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple and the deportation of the Israelites to Babylon. In its aftermath, God's people settled in exile struggling for survival. The historical and archaeological data from that period suggests that the exiles did well, successfully adapting to the new environment and establishing a stable way of life in secure communities. This apparent success did not alter the fact that they were living in a foreign land, subjects of an oppressive Babylonian rule. Their beloved city back in Judea was in ruins and they were scattered with little hope for the future. It was a stable but sad existence. Amidst this sadness, Isaiah hears and reports God's words, "Comfort, O comfort my people". God commands the prophet to embark on a mission of bringing joy and consolation to the disheartened and scattered nation. His message was to con-

tain the reassurance that the sins which caused the disaster of 586 B.C. have been forgotten, and that the time for restoration has come. Even nature is called upon to join in this mission of raising the people out of their sadness and dejection by an image of the wilderness preparing to welcome God by making the desert paths straight, levelling the mountains and filling in the valleys.

Our reading omits an important statement in Isaiah 40:6-8, where the prophet hears a skeptical voice, "all people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field." Apparently, this voice belongs to the dispirited exiles, who remember their past and doubt their ability not to repeat the mistakes of the past; their "constancy" cannot be trusted. Responding, the prophet concludes his oracle with the reassurance that God will not allow the people to go astray again. He will be like a caring shepherd, gathering and carrying them in his own bosom. The Israelites living as scattered strangers in a foreign land will be gathered and sheltered in God's caring arms. Proclaiming this message, the prophet aimed at bringing the exiles out of their dispirited sadness into the state of hopeful and confident joy.

The letter to Titus was addressed to the leader of an early Christian community with instructions on how to care for his flock. The reading focuses on the mighty acts of God's grace that brought salvation to all hu-

manity. This salvation begins already in this world, but its ultimate goal lies in the future, when the faithful will be brought to full union with God, when Jesus Christ returns. The author insists that the Christians had done nothing to merit this gift of God. Today's reading omits a significant verse, where the author, without any hesitation, describes Christians as having once been "foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another" (Titus 3:3). This shocking picture describes the Christians before their rebirth in the water, and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Before God intervened, they were living futile and contemptible lives, and did not merit any favors. God graciously rescued them from this sad existence by sending his Son as the Saviour. The author aims to instruct Titus and the believers that, while facing numerous external and internal challenges and temptations to return to this sad, pre-conversion existence, they must never lose sight of what they had been offered in Jesus. They had been led out of their sadness by God's grace, and they must not allow themselves to slip back into it. Their way out of sadness is the hope of future salvation, which is assured if they remain faithful to their baptism, and steadfast in living by the Spirit.

The account of Jesus' baptism begins with Luke describing the people gathered around John. They

were filled with fervent expectations of the Messiah. For them, the Messiah was to be a figure of grandeur who, filled with God's power, would restore the kingdom of Israel to its former glory. As it was, the Jewish people lived under the Roman rule, oppressed and burdened, completely at the mercy of those who had no concern for them. They laid their hopes for restoration on John, because he was baptizing and preaching repentance. However, John was not the Messiah and his baptism of water was a rite that the people underwent as a sign that they repented of their former, often sinful life, to be ready to welcome God's Messiah, Jesus, when he comes.

Jesus experienced two aspects of baptism. First, he accepted John's baptism of repentance, but not because he was a sinner. Repentance literally means "turning one's life around". This might involve turning away from sin, but it doesn't have to. For Jesus, John's baptism was a sign of his readiness to begin carrying out his mission as God's Messiah and the Savior. Jesus "repented" because, up to this point, he lived a quiet life of an ordinary Jewish man in Nazareth. Accepting John's baptism, Jesus gave a visible sign of his decision to turn away from a quiet, private life at home, to begin his public ministry as the Saviour of the world.

Secondly Jesus' baptism was Baptism in the Holy Spirit. As Jesus united himself to God in prayer, the Holy Spirit descended upon

him. Filled with this Spirit, Jesus will begin his mission as God's Messiah, and will carry out his ministry faithfully all the way to the cross. Then, after his resurrection and ascension, Jesus will send the same Holy Spirit upon the disciples. At Pentecost, John's prophecy will be fulfilled. Jesus truly is the one who came to baptize his followers with the Holy Spirit. For Jesus, baptism of the Holy Spirit is the starting point of his mission as the Savior. Later, the same baptism will be the beginning of the disciples' mission of bringing that salvation to the whole world.

Today's Gospel passage begins with a picture of the people eagerly awaiting God's intervention to bring them out of their desperate circumstances. Jesus' baptism by the Holy Spirit marks the beginning of that process, which will ultimately end with God's salvation being offered to the entire world. Jesus' baptism by the Holy Spirit is, therefore, ultimately the celebration of the beginning of God's consolation of the world.

The readings of today's feast demonstrate how God transforms sadness into joy. Isaiah comforts his downtrodden people in exile with a reassurance that God did not give up on them. The author of Titus reminds his Christians how God rescued them from their shameful past existence and gave them a new life in the hope of eternal salvation. Baptized in the Spirit, Jesus begins his mission as the Savior of the world. This mission will result in the fulfilling of

the peoples' hopes for liberation and salvation. All three readings emphasize that God constantly turns sadness into joy, leading believers to exclaim with the psalmist, "O Lord, how manifold are your works!"

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

The experience of concluding the many joyful celebrations of Christmastime and moving back into our daily routines and tasks may indeed bring a sense of sadness and discouragement. We all like to celebrate surrounded by family and friends, and feast on special foods and delicacies. But these occasional experiences are reserved for special times and seasons, highlighting the importance of what we are celebrating. This feast makes us aware that most of our life is spent in an everyday manner, with frequent and alternating experiences of joy and sadness.

Isaiah spoke to the people experiencing sadness because of the loss they experienced. That loss brought them to the brink of despair. We frequently experience losses. These losses could be very ordinary and insignificant, such as losing some money, or a phone. But they can also be very distressing and even life-threatening, such as a loss of a job, or a loved one, or health. Inevitably, all losses bring sadness of different intensity. When it comes to deep sadness, the words of Isaiah, commanded to comfort his

people by reminding them that God has never given up on them, become extremely important. No matter what our loss, that loss is not nonredeemable in one way or another. Our life may be changed by losses, but they will never make us lose what we hold as the most precious – God’s presence with us even when we lose all else.

Memories from the past may also lead us into sadness. We have all been hurt, we all hurt others, and we have all made regrettable mistakes. These mistakes tend to happen particularly in youth, when we experiment with many things, and often take wrong turns which we later regret. Like the Christians from our second reading, we may look at certain parts of our past life as “despicable”. Again, this may make us sad and doubt our own worth. The words of Scripture assure us that our past mistakes do not determine our present. They might have influence on us because our past deeds always have some consequences. But the past does not completely determine who we are now. God extended his offer of salvation to the unworthy people, and no matter how unworthy we might feel, God’s hand remains consistently outstretched towards us.

Jesus’ baptism had a two-fold character. By accepting John’s baptism of repentance, Jesus revealed his decision to begin his difficult mission of salvation, which would involve suffering, rejection and death. When re-

ceiving the baptism of Holy Spirit from God, he received the power and guidance necessary to carry out this mission faithfully. He received both these baptisms willingly, because he knew that his task on earth was to bring the people out of despair and darkness into the light of salvation. He did that successfully. As his followers we are called to do exactly the same – to find a way beyond our own sadness so that we can radiate the light of hope and bring the experience of salvation to others.

PROVERB

*“Sorrow
may sadden
your face,
but
it sharpens
your
understanding.”*

ACTION

Self-examination:

Where do I find true joy in my life, the one that allows me to remain cheerful even when in difficulties?

When did I last experience deep sadness? What was its cause, and what led me out of it?

Response to God:

Whenever sadness comes over me, I will turn to God in a prayer of thanksgiving, remembering the truly important and lasting gifts of faith, love, and hope which God continues to give me through his word and presence.

Response to your World:

I will carefully monitor my responses to the feelings of sadness, searching for the deeper meaning of these experiences, and the way to overcome them.

As a group, we look at our life situation, and discuss how we can act on the words God spoke to Isaiah, “Console, O console my people”. How can we be agents of consolation?

PRAYER

*Dear Heavenly Father,
you have shown
your consistent care
for your people
throughout their long history.
Thank you for helping us
to confront the sadness
that afflicts us periodically.
I pray
never to lose hope, trust
and a deep perspective on life,
that will allow me
to confront sadness
and be a ray of joy
to others who experience it.
Amen.*