

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

John 1:14a, 12a

R/. Alleluia, alleluia.

The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us.

To those who accepted him, he gave power to become children of God.

R/. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

John 1:29-34; L64A

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and said,

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

He is the one of whom I said,

‘A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.’

I did not know him,

but the reason why I came baptizing with water

was that he might be made known to Israel.”

John testified further, saying,

“I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from heaven and remain upon him.

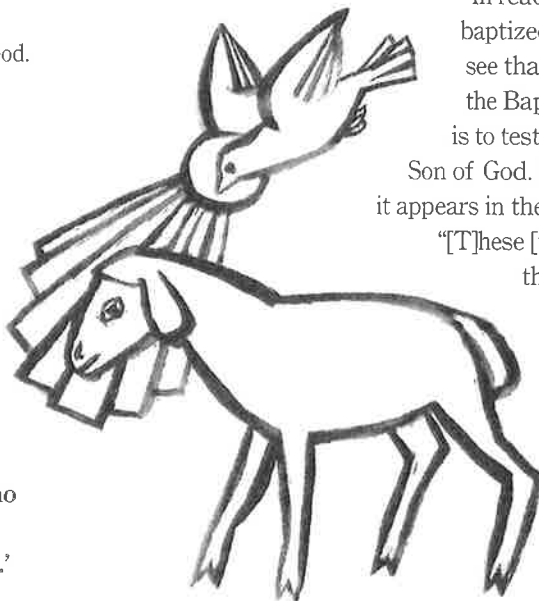
I did not know him,

but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me,

‘On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain,

he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’

Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God.”



Reflecting on the Gospel

Most children love magicians; they love to see them perform at birthday parties, events, and special shows. Magicians sometimes say they are more properly called “illusionists,” because that title more closely reflects what they actually do. They perform illusions rather than magic. We might say they are creating the illusion of magic. We think we see something, maybe a rabbit pulled from a hat or a card that disappears, but it is only an illusion.

In reading today’s gospel from John, we may think Jesus is baptized. But when we look at the story more carefully, we see that there’s no baptism at all. The story is about John the Baptist, but his role is not to baptize Jesus. Instead, it is to testify to Jesus—a testament that, namely, Jesus is the Son of God. This title is significant for the Gospel of John, and it appears in the closing verse of the gospel (prior to the epilogue): “[T]hese [things] are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name” (20:31; NABRE).

So what John the Baptist testifies to in the beginning, that Jesus is the Son of God, is the entire purpose of the gospel. And all of this is done without Jesus being baptized. We would need the other gospels to learn that Jesus was indeed baptized by John. This gospel gracefully omits that detail.

In addition to this narrative sleight of hand, the Gospel of John also claims that Jesus “existed before” John the Baptist. The prologue makes this clear in identifying the word of God in the beginning, and that the Word was made flesh. But here we have pre-existence on the lips of the Baptist himself. No other gospel is quite so explicit about this theological point. And the Baptist continues by saying the only reason he was baptizing at all was to give testimony to this one who “might be made known to Israel.”

When we read the Gospel of John, let’s pay special attention to the words he uses and the theological claims he makes. Otherwise, we might miss the essential truth and mistake it with a glance of an illusion. We are so familiar with these stories and the gospels, we can see what we already “know” and miss a deeper insight.

Living the Paschal Mystery

St. Paul tells us that we have been baptized into Christ’s death (Rom 6:3). Mark speaks of John’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, which Jesus also underwent (Mark 1:4, 9). But John the Baptist appears in the Fourth Gospel not to baptize Jesus, but to testify to him. Baptism, this foundational sacrament of water, has a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations in the New Testament and also for us today. When we dip our fingers into the holy water at church, we are reminded that we have been baptized into Christ’s death, with the forgiveness of sins. Then we, as his followers, are to testify to him in the world. Our belief in Jesus as the Son of God gives life in his name. We live this life having undergone the paschal mystery in our own baptism from death to new life.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

To the point: Written last of all the gospels, John’s word could be considered the fruit of the longest reflection on the person and mission of Jesus, the Christ. From the very first chapter, the evangelist tells us who Jesus is: “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” At the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, John the Baptist alludes to its completion on the wood of the cross, where Jesus, the sacrificial lamb, becomes the ultimate paschal sacrifice to deliver the people from death, just as the blood of the lamb caused the angel of death to pass over the households of the Hebrew people living in slavery in Egypt.

Connecting the Gospel

to the first and second readings: Along with proclaiming Jesus as the Lamb of God, John the Baptist also tells us what this Lamb has come to the earth to do: “baptize with the Holy Spirit.” The first and second readings show us what this baptism will enable and call us to. Through the prophet Isaiah, God tells the people of Israel, “I will make you a light to the nations.” Speaking to the Corinthians, St. Paul proclaims “you . . . have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy.” To be holy, to be a light, are not things that people can cause by the force of their own will. Only through the power of the Holy Spirit can our intentions to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the Lamb of God, be fulfilled.

to experience: Baptism is an image of immersion, to be completely submerged in a substance and then to emerge as a new creation. In the baptism that Jesus confers we are invited to view our lives as plunged into the holy and surrounded by the light and life of God.

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: Throughout the history of salvation, God has called upon human collaborators to work with him in building the kingdom of God on the earth. In today’s responsorial psalm, “Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will,” we find the response we can imagine must please the Lord above all others, a ready and willing partner to be God’s hands, heart, and love in the world. In the first reading the people of Israel are invited to take on this role, to be the servant through whom God shows his glory, and a light that will reach out to all nations. In the gospel, John the Baptist is the one who heralds the Son of God’s presence, and in the second reading St. Paul tells the Corinthians that now it is they who have been sanctified and are “called to be holy.”

to psalmist preparation: God’s work, and ours, has not yet been completed. We are the ones who are now invited to tell the Lord, “Here I am, I come to do your will.”

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

Once again, we have entered into Ordinary Time following the season of Christmas. While Lent, Advent, Christmas, and Easter all have their own themes and practices, sometimes Ordinary Time can seem, well, ordinary. How would you like to keep this time of living and growing in faith?

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God tells the people of Israel, “I will make you a light to the nations, / that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth.” Where is light most needed now in the world? How might the church seek to be this light in darkness?

The psalmist sings, “I have waited, waited for the Lord.” Patience is a difficult spiritual virtue to cultivate. How do you “wait on the Lord” and what practices help you in times where patience is required?

In his greeting to the church in Corinth, St. Paul reminds the people that they have been sanctified and called to holiness. Who models holiness for you in everyday life?