

## SPIRITUALITY

### GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

cf. Mark 9:7

R<sup>7</sup>. Alleluia, alleluia.

The heavens were opened and the voice of the  
Father thundered:

This is my beloved Son, listen to him.

R<sup>7</sup>. Alleluia, alleluia.

### Gospel

Matt 3:13-17; L21A

Jesus came from Galilee to John  
at the Jordan

to be baptized by him.

John tried to prevent him,  
saying,

“I need to be baptized by  
you,

and yet you are coming to  
me?”

Jesus said to him in reply,

“Allow it now, for thus it  
is fitting for us  
to fulfill all  
righteousness.”

Then he allowed him.

After Jesus was baptized,

he came up from the water and  
behold,

the heavens were opened for him,  
and he saw the Spirit of God  
descending like a dove  
and coming upon him.

And a voice came from the heavens,  
saying,

“This is my beloved Son, with whom  
I am well pleased.”



### Reflecting on the Gospel

Have you ever heard a story and then retold it to make it “better”? Maybe it was a question of timing, or introductions, or clarifying motivation. There are many ways stories are told and retold, and often they do get better in the retelling. This is what happens in today’s gospel when we hear Matthew’s version of the baptism of Jesus by John. The story Matthew had at hand was from Mark. There, John is said to have preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. So one question naturally arises: why would (sinless) Jesus undergo baptism for the forgiveness of sins? Also, Matthew has an entire infancy narrative with Joseph and Mary privy to his identity, something entirely absent from Mark’s version. Thus, in Mark the heavenly voice says, “You are my

beloved son” (addressed to Jesus). Not so in Matthew, where the heavenly voice says, “This is my beloved son.” In Matthew, the voice is not for Jesus’ sake but for the crowds. In these and in many other ways Matthew has improved the story—made it “better.”

The theological sophistication Matthew demonstrates is significant. He recognizes that John baptizing Jesus is a theological quandary. Thus, Matthew includes the exchange between these two. John protests and recognizes that he is the one who should be baptized by Jesus. Jesus does not match the apocalyptic vision John has been preaching. Instead, Jesus is mixing with sinners, those truly in need of baptism. In short, John objects to this state of affairs. But Jesus holds his ground and proposes that they proceed to fulfill “righteousness,” which means something like fulfilling what has been prophesied. The salvific intent of God has been foretold in the Scriptures. Each now is to play a designated part.

The command “Allow it now” by Jesus is followed by the straightforward “Then he allowed him.” This, too, echoes ancient Scripture whereby God would command and it would be followed. For example, in Genesis when God said to Abram, “[G]et up and go,” Abram “got up and went.” This is a classic “command-execution” formula.

Ultimately, the gospel passage we read today is not so much about the baptism of Jesus as it is about the revelation of Jesus’ identity to John and the others. Even the passive voice phrase “After Jesus was baptized” is only one word in Greek. Matthew spends much more time on the revelation of Jesus’ identity, the spirit of God, and the voice from heaven. As with so many episodes in the gospel, we would do well to focus on the theological insights conveyed by the author.

### Living the Paschal Mystery

Baptism is an ancient practice with some roots in the Essene community and in the ministry of John. Many of those ancient Jewish people who felt a need to repent of sin and experience forgiveness were baptized by John in the Jordan. How strange then that Jesus, too, went to John to be baptized. This has been a theological quandary ever since. Each evangelist handles the matter in a slightly different way, with the Gospel of John skipping the baptism altogether, so that John simply testifies to Jesus as the Lamb of God!

Baptism will be the way new members, too, are grafted on to this people of God, in imitation of Jesus himself. At the conclusion of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus commands the Eleven to go to the nations (Gentiles) and make disciples by baptizing them.

We see baptism then as a dying to a former way of life and living now for God. Once baptized we are welcomed into the family of God, living a life in the spirit, the same spirit that animated the ministry of Jesus. On this feast of the baptism, let us recall the meaning of our own baptism and live lives worthy of that call.

**Focusing the Gospel**

**Key words and phrases:** “I need to be baptized by you, / and yet you are coming to me?”

**To the point:** In this one question we encounter the entire “scandal of the incarnation.” Why would the divine creator of the world take on mortal flesh? Why would the sinless one partake in a baptism of repentance? Why would the master of the universe kneel to wash his disciples’ feet? And why would he remain on the cross to suffer a painful and agonizing death? Our surprise might match that of John the Baptist, and yet here on the banks of the Jordan River we find Jesus revealing once again that within himself there is no separation between the human and the divine. And so, of course, we find the Savior of the world among the sinners in order to fulfill all righteousness.

**Connecting the Gospel**

**to the second reading:** The second reading from the Acts of the Apostles comes immediately before the baptism of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who has sent for Peter to come to his house and speak to him about Jesus. In the verses before this reading Peter has a vision in which God proclaims that all foods are now clean. In speaking to Cornelius, Peter equates his vision of all categories of foods as clean with all categories of people: “God has shown me that I should not call any person profane or unclean” (10:28; NABRE). Cornelius and his household accept Peter’s testimony about Jesus and even as he continues to speak, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word.” Peter asks the Jewish Christians who have accompanied him to Cornelius’s house, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit even as we have?” (10:45, 47; NABRE).

**to experience:** In entering the waters of the Jordan for his baptism, Jesus sanctifies them. Baptism’s holy waters continues to call us and all people to new life in Christ.

**Connecting the Responsorial Psalm**

**to the readings:** In the responsorial psalm, the image of water is evoked twice. We hear that “the voice of the Lord is over the waters, / the Lord, over vast waters.” And then that “[t]he Lord is enthroned above the flood.” The first image reminds us of the waters of creation when “a mighty wind” swept over the waters (Gen 1:2; NABRE). The second of the great flood that washes creation clean again in the time of Noah. Both of these moments are referred to in the Rite of Baptism when the water in the font is blessed. The presider prays, “At the very dawn of creation your Spirit breathed on the waters, making them the well-spring of holiness. The waters of the great flood you made a sign of the waters of baptism, that make an end of sin and a new beginning of goodness” (54).

**to psalmist preparation:** In our everyday life, water cleanses and sustains us. How do you celebrate, remember, and renew the cleansing, sustaining power of your own baptism?

**PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING**

Each year we celebrate the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, an important moment in Jesus’ life and a transition to his public ministry. How do you celebrate the anniversary of your own baptism?

The first reading from the prophet Isaiah seems to contain an oxymoron—the Lord’s chosen one will “bring forth justice to nations” while “not crying out, not shouting, / not making his voice heard in the street.” Who models this quiet, nonviolent justice for you?

In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter ends his summary of Jesus’ ministry by stating, “He went about doing good / and healing all those oppressed by the devil, / for God was with him.” How does your family and parish community continue to carry out the ministry of Jesus?

After Jesus is baptized, a voice from the heavens proclaims, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” From this place of “belovedness” Jesus begins his public ministry. How would it change your ministry if you were to hear the voice of God proclaim to you each day, “You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased”?