

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

cf. Luke 3:16

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

John said: One mightier than I
is coming;
he will baptize you with the
Holy Spirit and with fire.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22; L21C

The people were filled
with expectation,
and all were asking in
their hearts
whether John might be
the Christ.

John answered them all,
saying,

“I am baptizing you
with water,
but one mightier than I
is coming.

I am not worthy to
loosen the thongs of his sandals.
He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit
and fire.”

After all the people had been baptized
and Jesus also had been baptized and
was praying,

heaven was opened and the Holy
Spirit descended upon him
in bodily form like a dove.

And a voice came from heaven,
“You are my beloved Son;
with you I am well pleased.”



Reflecting on the Gospel

The baptism of an infant is the cause of much joy, celebration, and love among family and friends. The baby is welcomed into the Christian community, a community of grace, support, and encouragement in the face of all that life can bring. This ritual action has its roots not only in Jesus but in John, “the Baptist” who was so named precisely because of this action he performed at the Jordan River. The early followers of Jesus recognized that Jesus’ own ministry began after he was baptized by John, a story first recounted in the Gospel of Mark, which states that John preached a baptism of “forgiveness of sins.” This story is echoed in Luke as well (Luke 3:3).

Thus, we (and the early Christians) experience a theological quandary. Why did Jesus, who is said to be without sin, submit to baptism by John? To what purpose or to what end is a baptism of forgiveness of sins to one without sin? Responses to this question were as varied as the gospel writers and church fathers themselves. Matthew says that it is “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3:15; NABRE). The Gospel of John simply neglects to say that Jesus was baptized by John. Instead, John the Baptist merely testifies to Jesus without baptizing him at all. Luke places the baptism of Jesus in the passive voice and almost as an afterthought: “After all the people had been baptized / and Jesus also had been baptized” (Luke 3:21). Other than the Synoptics, neither Paul nor any other New Testament authors mention Jesus being baptized.

As indicated by the gospels, the ministry of Jesus began at or shortly after his baptism. And Luke shows that the Holy Spirit was active at this time, descending upon Jesus “in bodily form like a dove.” Though Matthew says the Spirit descended upon him like a dove, only Luke says, “*in bodily form* like a dove.” This phrase reflects Luke’s tendency to objectivize the supernatural and it is something we will notice throughout this gospel. Further, Luke is also the only evangelist to say that Jesus was at prayer during this event. Prayer is another Lucan theme that we will see throughout his gospel: Luke shows Jesus at prayer more than any other evangelist. Luke will also show the early Christian community at prayer in the Acts of the Apostles.

So in these four short verses we have Lucan theology bursting from the page. Jesus is baptized by John (passive voice) though John preaches a baptism of forgiveness of sins. Luke objectivizes the supernatural by saying the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove, and Luke shows Jesus at prayer.

Living the Paschal Mystery

When we are about to make an important or life-altering decision we certainly pause to give it some thought. Before accepting a new position, a big move, or making a commitment to someone or something we likely ask God’s guidance and wisdom. Some state simply that this is a prayer. And it seems Jesus did the same: he prayed before he embarked on his ministry.

If Luke is certain to show us that Jesus prayed, we are sure to see this as an example for our own lives. We are to pray. Significantly, Luke does not tell us what Jesus prayed only *that* he prayed. And this has ramifications for us too.

We are to be a people of prayer who consult and communicate with the Almighty, seeking direction, guidance, wisdom, and insight before embarking on our way.

When we pray we imitate Jesus and the relationship he lived with the Father. We also imitate the early Christians. We recognize that prayer is not limited to the liturgy or to formal recitation of memorized texts. Instead, it is a reflection of the relationship we have with God.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.

To the point: In the beginning of Luke’s gospel Jesus is named “Son of God” by the angel Gabriel, “my Lord” by Elizabeth, and “Messiah” by the angel of the Lord. Now, after being baptized in the River Jordan, Jesus is given another name, “beloved Son.” Assured of God’s love and approval, Jesus is ready to begin his public ministry.

Connecting the Gospel

to the second reading: In the Acts of the Apostles we see the moment of the baptism of Jesus, which was first witnessed by the people of Israel and then opened up to all people. Peter, the quintessential Jewish apostle, is called to visit the Roman centurion Cornelius, a Gentile. Through prayer, mystical vision, and meeting with Cornelius, Peter is finally able to proclaim, “God shows no partiality.” Even though the good news of Jesus first came to the people of Israel, it is meant as a gift for all.

to experience: It is easy in life to want to divide the world into “us” and “them.” As human beings we are naturally more comfortable when surrounded by people and places that are familiar to us. As Christians, however, we are called to proclaim a God who shows no partiality. How might we live this good news in our lives?

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: This psalm gives praise to God, whose might and glory is shown by his command of the waters of the earth. This water is destructive at times through flooding, but water also brings life into the dry desert. We hear that “[t]he voice of the LORD is over the waters” and remember how in the beginning the Holy Spirit hovered over the waters of the earth. We hear that “[t]he LORD is enthroned above the flood” and remember God promising Noah and his descendants never again to send water to wipe out creation. In the gospel a new moment in salvation history is narrated and it, too, contains water. Jesus steps forward to be baptized in the waters of the Jordan River and when he comes out we again hear the “voice of the LORD . . . over the waters.” This heavenly voice proclaims, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased,” and we can picture Jesus at prayer “enthroned” at the Jordan River as he lives more fully into his kingship as God’s beloved.

to psalmist preparation: Proclaim this psalm with awe and wonder. The God we serve and worship is the God of all creation. Remember a time when you were awestruck by nature. Perhaps it was during a beautiful sunset, seeing the view from a mountaintop or gazing out at the ocean for the first time. Our God is creator and ruler of all this. As part of his creation let us, too, cry, “Glory!”

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

On this feast of the Baptism of the Lord, consider your own baptismal day. What do you remember or what have you been told about the day you were baptized?

This feast day officially marks the last day of the Christmas season. Looking back on the weeks since December 25th, what has been most meaningful for you this Christmas? What traditions would you like to continue? Looking forward to next year, what would you like to do differently?

After being baptized, Jesus prays. In Luke’s gospel we often see Jesus in prayer. How would you like to enrich your own prayer life this year?

At his baptism Jesus hears the voice of God saying, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” Is it easy or difficult for you to believe that you are God’s beloved? Why do you think this is?