

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

cf. Luke 3:16

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

John said: One mightier than I is coming;

he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

R⁷. 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

Hopefully, we have often witnessed it: the priest rolling up his sleeves in readiness for the ministry of the waters, the invitation of the children in the assembly to gather around the font, the reverent taking of the naked, tiny, and vulnerable scrap of humanity, and the holding up of him or her to the people into whose faith this child will be baptized. Then there is the triple immersion:

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—sometimes with slightly outraged protest, more often with the quietness of pleasant familiarity with the waters of the womb. Then another elevation, and this child of God is shown with a new christened identity to the assembly. There is always applause, always a smile on even the most bored faces, and a moment in which human and holy solidarity is felt, not only by the proud parents but also by the gathered local church. It is a moment that is truly "sacramental," a sign of some greater and hidden mystery of God's extraordinary love; and it is a humbling realization. The child has done nothing to deserve this, except for the wonderful obedience of being born. One can almost hear the biblical question echoing down the centuries, with all its hopes and fears: "What, then, will this child be?" (Luke 1:66). In Luke's gospel, that question had been asked about John the Baptist at his circumcision. It is the adult John whom we meet again in today's gospel, and it is in the context of water and baptism.



The solidarity of a parish baptism, the communal event that it is, reflects Luke's narrative. Jesus is surrounded by people who had been baptized by John. John the Baptist is humble and strong, for when the people express a wondering expectancy that he might be the promised Messiah, John resists the temptation to self-aggrandizement and is quick to dispel any illusions about his status. He is only a servant, he says, who is not even worthy to perform the menial task of doing up the sandal straps of the coming One. He points out to the crowd the differences between himself and the One who is to come: his is a baptism of water and repentance; the Messiah's will be a baptism of transformation through fire and the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist is probably referring to the end time, but Luke announces this with the insight of a post-Pentecost evangelist and the experience of the transformation of that fire and wind-struck day (Acts 2:1-4).

To the good news of solidarity and humility, Luke adds the significance of prayer. Several times in his gospel, Luke sets important events in Jesus's life and mission in the context of prayer (e.g., Luke 6:12-13; 9:28; 22:42-46). Jesus dies with the words of Psalm 31:5 on his lips. The baptism of the Lord could be called a prayer event, for Luke does not describe the moment of baptism but rather its aftermath. It is Jesus's prayer that tears open the heavens for the descent of the Holy Spirit and the revelation of his true identity by the Father's voice that acclaims him as the beloved Son on whom God's favor rests.

It is the same for us. Prayer is a necessary part of our identity as baptized sons and daughters of God. It opens heaven to us and reveals who we are—for, in a very real sense, we are who we pray. At prayer, we struggle to hear what God is calling us to be, to know who we are in our deepest truth, at the

still point where the Spirit has descended into our depths and anointed us for mission.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: "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."

To the point: Jesus joins us to him in baptism. The Trinity is on full display here, as Jesus, beginning his public ministry, is baptized by the Holy Spirit. Jesus receives his baptism through John, who, it is worth noting, is not God. Not only do we witness Jesus participating in an act that will become the cornerstone of the Christian faith, but we see it facilitated by a human whose divinity is as precarious as our own.

It is through Jesus's humanity that we are saved. He is both fully human and fully divine, and in this scene, his humanity is on display for us. He receives the sacrament of baptism, and thus participates in the act that our own lives require to gain entry to heaven. He's God. Why should Jesus bother getting baptized, if he is one with the Holy Spirit already? Because the very act of God entering into humanity is to participate in it fully, unto death, and thus dignify human life and make it worthy of heaven.

Connecting the Gospel

to the first reading: The first reading from Isaiah is full of contradicting imagery. Comfort for the people is followed by the scene of mountains falling down and valleys being raised—not necessarily a comforting natural event. Zion goes to the top of a mountain to cry out, loudly, and yet the Lord being heralded is a shepherd, gathering his flock into his arms. This imagery creates a dichotomy of physical stress (mountains falling, crying out) with comfort and safety (being brought into a hug). This reading accompanies the baptism of Jesus, which is also an ironic event.

to experience: Why does God need to be baptized by God? Because it is within this seeming contradiction that our own salvation lies. Because God is fully human and fully divine, it is through this act of living as one of us, alongside other humans, that our own lives are sanctified. Paul tells us in the second reading, "he saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he richly poured out on us through Jesus Christ our savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life."

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: This week's psalm is full of magnificent imagery: God robed in light, heaven spread like a tent, God traveling on clouds and opening his hands and spilling food onto all of the earth. It is a love poem, an ode to our Creator. This imagery gives God human traits like being clothed, having a palace, traveling, and opening a hand. This poetic personification of God comes to fruition in the person of Jesus, long after the psalmist proclaimed his glory using the imagery of humanity.

to psalmist preparation: Psalms that contain poetic imagery can often feel too esoteric to be easily accessible. Take time this week to really focus on what these images mean and how describing God with human traits is a way of bringing our Creator closer to us.

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

Why do you think Jesus was baptized, if he is God?

What is your favorite image of God in this week's readings? What about that image brings you comfort?

What is your relationship with the Holy Spirit like? Do you ever pray to the Holy Spirit? Why or why not?

How do you prepare the way of the Lord in your family, neighborhood, career, and community?
