

FIRST READING: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

Thus says the LORD: Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations, not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street. a bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench, until he establishes justice on the earth; the coastlands will wait for his teaching. I, the LORD, have called you for the victory of justice, I have grasped you by the hand; I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10.

The Lord will bless his people with peace.

Give to the LORD, you sons of God, give to the LORD glory and praise, Give to the LORD the glory due his name; adore the LORD in holy attire.

The Lord will bless his people with peace.

The voice of the LORD is over the waters, the LORD, over vast waters. The voice of the LORD is mighty; the voice of the LORD is majestic.

The Lord will bless his people with peace.

The God of glory thunders, and in his temple all say, "Glory!" The LORD is enthroned above the flood; the LORD is enthroned as king forever.

The Lord will bless his people with peace.

SECOND READING: Acts of the Apostles 10:34-38

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

Peter proceeded to speak to those gathered in the house of Cornelius, saying: "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him. You know the word that he sent to the Israelites as he proclaimed peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all, what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him."

The word of the Lord.

Gospel: Mark 1:7-11

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark:

This is what he proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was

baptized in the Jordan by John. On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the Baptism of Jesus

Scripture scholars agree that the public mission and ministry of Jesus began with his baptism at the Jordan River by John the Baptist. All four of the gospels tell the story of Jesus' baptism. Minor details of the story vary from evangelist to evangelist but all relate that Jesus was baptized. The three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, have Jesus leaving for a retreat in the wilderness just after the event. John differs by having Jesus choosing his disciples. Most of us focus on the significance of the synoptic infancy story, but Jesus public life began here. Baptism marks the beginning of the good news being preached.

Baptism for us is the first and most important of the Seven Sacraments. Without baptism, no one is able to receive the other six of them. Several things happen at Baptism. People become sons or daughters of God and brothers and sisters with Jesus and one another. We become members of the Church and heirs of Jesus' mission and ministry. We enter into faith and covenant with God. Our sins are forgiven and we receive the promise of eternal life and resurrection. When Jesus returns, we inherit the Kingdom of God.

No one sees these things happen. What we see is the ritual. The ritual contains the signs that convey our reception of God's gifts as they are contained with and through the Sacrament. Let me begin with the notion of sign and symbol. A symbol is a physical representation of something we can't see like an idea or vision. We use words to express our ideas. Language is primarily symbolic. Even the components of words use letters which represent the sounds we make as we speak. The symbol of the United States of America is the American Flag. When we see it, it conveys more meaning than a simple piece of colored cloth. Even the way our flag is presented conveys symbolic meaning. Flying full it can represent the totality of our history, allegiance and national pride. Flying at half-mast we know mourning for death. Flying upside-down conveys an on-going crisis. Yet, in essence, the American flag is just a piece of colored cloth that we have accepted and adopted as our national symbol.

For those of us of a certain age, if I ask the question, "What is a Sacrament?" It can invoke, like a knee-jerk reflex, an answer, memorized, from the Baltimore Catechism, "A Sacrament is an outward sign, instituted by Christ to give grace." Signs are symbols that have an actual meaning contained within themselves. Signs have a few basic functions. Signs can proclaim an identity, like the name Divine Savior emblazoned on the façade of our parish church building. Signs can identify place or location like the street signs on the corner of Montrose and Ozanum. Signs can call for action like a stop sign or flashing railroad lights. The signs of the Sacrament are something more. The examples I used are man-made and their meaning comes from human consensus. The signs of Baptism are oil, touch, water, lit candle and perfume. Oil can represent healing, like an antiseptic or strength since oil never dissolves in water and when it burns it gives off heat and light. Human touch always conveys meaning whether a caress, slap or hug. Water means life or death. We need it to remain alive and healthy. If there's too much of it, we can drown. A lit candle emits heat and light. One smells perfume without seeing it. It can waft on air currents and linger long after its source has left a room.

The first anointing used the Oil of the Catechumens to reject sin and to live in the freedom of God's children. Touch passes on faith in Jesus and the mission to share the faith with others. We believe that in Baptism we die to sin and are reborn to new life in Jesus. Water, as a sign of life and death, we use as the sign that we have received new life. The lit candle shows that Christ is within us and will show forth as we enter a waiting world. We become God's anointed ones and receive the Holy Spirit when anointed with perfume. We use Chrism as this sign, the same perfume used to anoint Israelite kings in the bible, the feet of Jesus, people's foreheads in confirmation and the hands of those who become priests. With it, in Baptism, we are anointed priest, prophet and king. A priest offers sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. A prophet proclaims God's Word. A king governs and rules. Each of us, as a sinner, approaches God for our forgiveness. By our actions and words we give witness to Jesus, God's Word. When Jesus returns at the end of the age to establish the Kingdom of God, we, the anointed, will rule with him as co-heirs.

Jesus began his mission to save us and his ministry to serve us with his baptism at the Jordan. Since he was fully God and like us in all but sin, he needed not redemption or forgiveness. He had nothing to repent. He accepted his mission to be the means of our redemption and forgiveness. Through his cross, he revealed the extent of God's love, eternal, infinite and unconditional. Jesus died for us and in our place as he took upon himself all our sin, weakness and pain. By his wounds God has healed us. Through his rising from the dead, we now have a share in God's life; now, in eternity and in the Kingdom of God. Jesus baptism is not for him, but for our sake. Faith, Baptism, forgiveness and the promise of New Life are the gifts Jesus has freely won for us.

Isaiah's lesson is about God's chosen, anointed servant. From our perspective of faith, we know this to be Jesus. What about the perspective of God; who else can this be? Isaiah's prophecy is about God's covenant, "I am your God and you are God's people. The covenant is not about the One but the Many. Israel was seen to be a Kingdom of Priests. So is the Church for we are also inheritors of God's covenant, through Jesus. We, individually and collectively, have become a light of faith to the nations, just as the people of Israel and Jesus have.

The fruits of the Sacrament of Baptism are spiritual and an inner, personal experience. Baptism also has an impact upon how we live. Its experience is so pivotal and significant that it transforms us completely. Once we receive Baptism one can never become un-baptized. Baptism is an experience of re-birth into the life of Jesus. Just as when we are born, we can only move forward in life and never return to the womb, Baptism leads us forward and can never go back. Back-sliding through sin is something else and marks us as human beings. Baptism forgives sin. As a matter of fact, all the sacraments forgive sin, mainly the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. When we receive the Anointing of the Sick, God heals and forgives us too. Because of our Baptism, as a beloved child of God, whenever we turn to God in prayer, God forgives as God draws us more closely into a relationship.

For centuries Jesus mission and ministry was seen as the responsibility of a few, the clergy. We still come to a priest to receive many of the sacraments. The notion of the Priesthood of the Baptized, that we all share, took a back seat to clerical elitism. The mission and ministry of the Church are really shared by all who are baptized. This is the result of the renewal of the Church brought about through the Second Vatican Council. An ecumenical council of the Church is the highest authority. The whole Church acts as one to declare the faith, practice and vision of Christ's Church. I'm not going to give a lesson on Vatican II. That's a series of topics for Adult Formation when the threat of COVID 19 lessens.

Peter addressed a common challenge we all face as people. Tommy Smuthers always had a line he would deliver to his brother Dick. "Mom always liked you best." Does God have favorites? Will some believers have a higher status in the Kingdom of God? Will there be a hierarchy too? Peter spoke boldly, "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him." With regards to a hierarchy, we clergy can be seen, and often act, as an elite group. The vision of Jesus stemmed from the Incarnation; God became a human being and taking on the form of a slave, as Paul wrote. Jesus, the Son of God, died the death of a criminal. He took upon himself all our sins and was executed for them. The role of all of us clergy is to serve the church. We are servants of God and God's people not princes. We are sinners just like everyone else. We put our pants on one leg at a time too. It is part of our sin and hubris to pretend a higher status. Each human being is created by God in God's love. Each one of us is God's beloved for when God sees us; God sees God's own image and likeness. God called Jesus a beloved son. God calls each of us God's beloved daughter or son too.

The gospel of Mark used a unique turn of phrase. The heavens did not just open as Jesus came up out of the water; they were torn open. We tear open letters, boxes and Christmas presents. Tearing something open is an irrevocable action; it can never be un-torn. Scotch tape is a dead give-a-way that someone else opened the mail and tried to hide it. What did Mark intend with that powerful image? We can use the image of the heavens torn open during a powerful storm that wreaks much damage. Was the descent of the Holy Spirit a violent event? Was the voice of God a thunderous sound? I don't think so. A tear in a seam can be mended and closed and can be just like new. A tear in the fabric cannot; the spot mended will never look new. A tear in the heavens will never be mended either. The barrier between heaven and earth, God and human beings and one another, through Jesus, exists no more. God became one like us. Jesus walked among us. Jesus walks still, as he promised. The saving act of Jesus has redeemed us once and for all.

Baptism began Jesus' mission to save us. Our Baptism began our mission in faith. As Jesus offered his life on the cross, we received his gift. Baptism has initiated us into faith and the Church. Baptism has made us Jesus' sisters and brothers; children of God, the Father. As we gather together Jesus is in our midst. God, our Father, says to each of us as God said to Jesus, "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased. With Christ, let us listen for God's voice.

May you remain in good health. May God give you patience and strength to give witness.

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