

The Baptism of Jesus

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7
<i>Response</i>	May the Lord bless his people with peace!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10
<i>Second Reading</i>	Acts 10:34-38
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 1:7-11

The Sunday of the Baptism of the Lord for year B brings the Christmas season to a close and opens the season of Ordinary Time. So it’s kind of like a segue between these two great seasons of the liturgical year. And this Sunday, in a sense, ushers us into our journey through the public ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark...because we are in year B.

So what we’re going to do in this video is look at the Gospel reading for today, which is from Mark 1:7-11. It’s Mark’s relatively brief account of the Baptism of Jesus, and then we’ll go back and look at the Old Testament background and the psalm and see how they connect with the Gospel for today and try to draw out, in particular, what Mark the Evangelist wants to reveal to us about the mystery of Jesus’ Baptism. So in Mark 1:7 and following, the Gospel says this:

And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a

voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.”¹

So again, notice a couple things here about Mark’s account of the Baptism. It’s very short, which is kind of in keeping with Mark’s brevity as a whole. This is the shortest of the four Gospels, and especially with regard to some of the early episodes of Jesus’ public ministry, Mark is remarkably brief in his account, when compared with, say, Matthew...or Luke in certain occasions. Temptation narrative is another example of that.

The second thing about Mark’s account that stands out— just before I move to the meaning of the episode itself, in the Baptism itself—is you’ll notice Mark’s language of “immediately:”

...when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove...

Well, that Greek word *eutheós*, immediately, is probably Mark’s favorite word, because he uses it throughout the Gospel right here from chapter 1 all the way to the end of the Gospel. There’s a certain force—a certain power, a certain energy—in Mark’s Gospel that this word in particular drives along as he’s telling the narrative. In Mark’s account of Jesus’ public ministry in particular, Jesus doesn’t waste any time. He moves immediately from His Baptism into the desert. He moves immediately from the desert to preaching in the towns. He goes immediately from one town to the next, so there’s this sense of urgency that’s characteristic of Mark’s Gospel.

Alright, those two little observations about Mark being made, let’s back up and look at what’s actually going on in the Baptism here. The first point I want to make about the Baptism of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel has to do with what John says about Jesus—John’s testimony about who Jesus is. So we all know who John the Baptist is; we’ve looked at him in other videos. He’s a prophet who comes onto the scene.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

He's immersing people in the river Jordan. He's proclaiming a message of repentance from sin and practicing a Baptism (or immersion in water) for the forgiveness of sins. And he's also a prophet.

So he comes onto the scene, and one of the things he's doing is preaching and teaching. And he says here:

“After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

Now, the question we want to ask here is: Who is John speaking about? Now most of us when we read the Gospel, we think, “Oh, he's talking about Christ.” And of course, that's true. But if you want to ask yourself also: Who would his first Jewish listeners have thought he was speaking about? Who were the people being baptized by John in the Jordan have thought or assumed he was speaking about?

And again, most of us, if we read the Gospels frequently, our default answer to that question would be, “Well, John is talking about the Messiah. He's the forerunner of the Messiah.” And that, of course, is also true. But if you look at his words in context, although that of course, both of those are true—he's speaking about the Messiah and he's speaking about Jesus—in a first century Jewish context, you can make the case that that's not the primary meaning of his words, for two reasons. First, he doesn't say the word “Messiah.” You'll notice he doesn't say, “After me is coming *ho christos*”...the Anointed One, the Messiah. He just says, “one mightier than I,” who I'm not even worthy to untie His sandals. He is coming after me.

But a case can be made that in context of John's ministry, that John is actually preparing people not just for the coming of Jesus, not just for the coming of the Messiah, but for the coming of God Himself. And the way you can see this is by looking at the Old Testament background of the Baptism. So if you back up to Mark 1:1-2, Mark begins his instruction of John the Baptist by saying:

“Behold, I send my messenger before thy face,
who shall prepare thy way;
the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight—”

Now that’s an allusion to Isaiah chapter 40—very famous prophecy of a new Exodus in the book of Isaiah 40. What’s fascinating, though, if you go back and you read all of Isaiah 40 in context, you’ll see Isaiah 40 doesn’t say anything about the coming of the Messiah. What it talks about is the coming of God. So I’ll just read two verses from that to show you. It’s Isaiah 40:3:

A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings..

Literally, “Good News”...

...lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Behold your God!”
Behold, the Lord God comes...

So yes, John the Baptist is preparing the way in the wilderness. Yes, he’s preparing for the coming of one after him. But in context, if he’s the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, if he’s the figure in Isaiah 40:3...if you read the entire prophecy in context, the figure that that voice prepares for is nowhere said to be the Messiah but is said to be the Lord, the Lord God coming in person to Jerusalem—the Good News of the advent of God.

So a number of scholars have actually pointed to this verse as one of the first implications, one of the first pieces of evidence in Mark’s Gospel that Jesus is being depicted from the very beginning as not just the Messiah, not just the Christ, not just the Savior, but God coming in person...the one God of Israel who has come to inaugurate this new exodus that John the Baptist is the herald of.

And if that were true, it would make sense why John would say he's not even worthy to stoop down and untie the sandals of the man who's coming after him. Because if He's not just a man, and He's also the one God, you can see why John expresses his unworthiness in such a striking image. Because to untie your sandals would be what a slave would do. When the master would get home, the servant would untie the thong of his sandals, take off his shoes, and wash his feet. And John says, "I'm not even worthy to do that." So that's the first point. The coming one, in other words, is the coming of God.

The second thing is John's statement:

I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.
(Mark 1:8)

So what you see here is two Baptisms. And the word *baptizō* in Greek, as you might have heard before, it means "to immerse" in water or to plunge into water. So when we say John the Baptist, we really mean John the Baptizer...would be a more literal translation. He's the one who immerses people in water. So John is drawing a distinction here between immersion in water and immersion in the Holy Spirit. And again, although as Christians when we read the Gospels, we tend to read back into it a full theology of the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity. In John's day, there wouldn't have been that kind of fullness of understanding. In fact, there certainly wouldn't have been because Jesus isn't even going to reveal that to the disciples until the Last Supper accounts in the Gospel of John, where He speaks about the Paraclete and talks about Him as a person who's going to be sent.

But there is not just the terminology of the Holy Spirit in first century Judaism, but also an expectation of an outpouring of the Spirit of God in the latter days, in the end times, in the age of the Messiah. So John here is tapping into first century Jewish expectations about the age of salvation. And what he's doing then is tying that expectation that the Holy Spirit will be poured out to his own Baptism. So his immersion of people in water is preparing for the immersion of those who are

penitent, who repent and believe the Gospel, with the Spirit—the Holy Spirit of God.

Alright, so...preparation. Now what about the Baptism itself? That's actually what we're celebrating today, of course. So when it says:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

It of course means that He was immersed in the water of the Jordan. But Mark's account is really fascinating, because it has two features that stand out. First, when Jesus comes up out of the water, it says:

...immediately he saw the heavens opened...

Now the Greek word there for "open" is actually a little stronger than the English "open." It's *schizō*. It literally means "torn open." So for example, we get the word schizophrenic from this in English. A schizophrenic is a person who has a torn personality. Their personality, their identity, has been torn in two. That's what Mark is saying Jesus sees. He doesn't just see the clouds parting. He sees Heaven being torn open.

And then what happens is as the Heavens are torn open, second:

...a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son... (Mark 1:11a)

So the Father speaks from Heaven and identifies Jesus as His *huios*, His "son." So there's an implicit revelation here, both of the fatherhood of God and the divine sonship of Christ at His Baptism.

Now what's so interesting about that is that Mark, in particular, uses these very same two words—*schizō* and *huios*—that are found in the account of the Baptism...he uses them again in the account of the crucifixion. So whereas in the Baptism of Jesus, the Heavens are *schizō* (they're torn open) and the Father declares, "This is my beloved Son"...at the crucifixion of Jesus, the veil within the

temple is torn in two—*schizō*, same word—and the centurion at the foot of the cross on Earth says:

“Truly this man was the Son of God!”

Huios—same term there. That’s in Mark 15:38-39. So this takes on a particular significance when you know (as Josephus tells us) that woven into the fabric of the veil were the images of the constellations in the Heavens. So the tearing of the temple veil is a symbolic tearing asunder of the Heavens, of the sky, of the visible sky of the visible Heavens. So there’s a parallel here and Mark sees it, and he’s highlighting it for you in which between the Baptism of Christ and the crucifixion of Christ...in such a way that the Baptism of Jesus isn’t just a revelation of His divine sonship. It isn’t just a revelation of His Messianic identity, in that He’s being anointed with the Spirit, but rather, it’s also an anticipation of His passion and death on the cross. It’s an anticipation of His crucifixion.

And that helps us understand the Old Testament reading for today. If you go back, it’s from Isaiah 42: 1-4, 6-7. And this is one of Isaiah’s famous prophecies of the servant. Listen to what Isaiah says:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him,
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not fail or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.

Now skip down to verse 6:

“I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Alright, so why does the Church pick *this* reading as the Old Testament reading for the Baptism of the Lord? Well, the answer is really clear. If you look there, in this prophecy, Isaiah is speaking of a future servant who will be chosen by God in whom God will take delight and upon whom God will pour out His Spirit so that He will bring righteousness not just to Israel but to the nations, so that He will give a new teaching to the people, so that He will Himself will become a covenant and open the eyes of the blind and bring out prisoners from the dungeon. In other words, it’s kind of like an itinerary of Jesus’ public ministry that begins with His anointing of the Spirit on the day of His Baptism.

So Jesus is being revealed—in the light of this Old Testament background—not just as the Son of God, but as the servant of Isaiah...who, if you know the book of Isaiah well, by the time you get to chapter 52 and 53, the servant is not just going to bring a new law, he’s not just going to bring a new teaching, he’s not just going to perform miracles, but he’s also going to suffer and die for the sins of his people...for the sins of the many. In fact, he says “for the sins of all.” So he’ll become a living sacrifice of atonement for the sins of humanity. And that’s going to play out, obviously, in the passion. So the servant, once again, is a link between the Baptism of Jesus and the suffering of Christ, just as we see Mark linking the Baptism and crucifixion.

Alright, so with this in mind, the psalm for today, the responsorial psalm...is from Psalm 29. And it’s a psalm about the voice of the Lord upon the waters and over the flood. So if you look at Psalm 29, this imagery of the voice of the Lord echoing or crying out over the waters or upon the waters, in Psalm 29:2:

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters;

the God of glory thunders,
the Lord, upon many waters.

This psalm points forward to the voice of the Father that speaks over the waters of the Jordan as Jesus is immersed in them. So in its original context, it's speaking here just about God's voice thundering throughout creation, but prophetically, it's going to find fulfillment in the voice of the Father speaking over the waters in which the Son is baptized and reveals Himself as the suffering servant of biblical prophecy.

Alright, there's your connection between the Old Testament, psalm, and the Gospel reading for today. Now, it's brief, but it's powerful to think about...and I'd actually like to close out with a quote from Pope Benedict XVI. This is one of my favorite quotes from his three-volume book, *Jesus of Nazareth*—which, if you haven't read, I highly recommend it. It's really profound. And especially in this first volume, one of my favorite chapters is the chapter on the Baptism and the temptations of Jesus.

And in his discussion on the Baptism, Pope Benedict brings out the link between the Baptism of Christ and the crucifixion of Christ in a way that's very powerful, and I think worth quoting and reflecting on for just a moment. So this is what Benedict XVI says:

Looking at the events in the light of the Cross and Resurrection, the Christian people realized what happened: *Jesus loaded the burden of all mankind's guilt upon his shoulders; he bore it down into the depths of the Jordan. He inaugurated his public activity by stepping into the place of sinners. His inaugural gesture is an anticipation of the Cross...* The Baptism is an acceptance of death for the sins of humanity, and the voice that calls out "This is my beloved Son" over the baptismal water is an anticipatory reference to the Resurrection. This explains why, in his own discourses, Jesus uses the word baptism to refer to his death (cf. Mk 10:38; Lk 12:50).²

² Pope Benedict, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol. 1, p. 18 [emphasis added]

That's from *Jesus of Nazareth*, page 18. Now...there's so much packed into this quote here. It's really fascinating. But what the Pope is really saying there—at least for me—a few things stand out. First, this answers the question of why Jesus had to be baptized. Have you ever wondered that? You should have, because in Matthew, John the Baptist actually asks, “Why are we doing this? I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me.” And Jesus says:

“Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

It's not exactly the clearest answer to the question, but He obviously assumes that John is going to understand what He means. So Benedict kind of goes a little further there and explains it by saying...what's happening here is that the reason Jesus has to be baptized, even though He Himself was without sin, is the same reason that He has to go to the cross, even though He Himself is without sin. He steps into the place of sinners by receiving John's Baptism for the forgiveness of sins as an anticipation of the cross on which He will, in fact, take the burden of the sins of humanity upon His own shoulders in order to atone for them.

So the Baptism is the ultimate anticipation of Jesus' passion as the suffering servant who atones for the sins of humanity. In other words, Jesus didn't *have* to be baptized any more than He *had* to go to the cross. He goes down to the waters of the Jordan for our sake and for our salvation. And I think, at least for me, I don't think most people think of Jesus' Baptism as an anticipation of the cross. I don't know about you...I tended to think of it for many years just as a public revelation of His identity. Hey everybody, here is the Son of God, and God is really well pleased with Him.

But the reason the Father is so well pleased with Him is because the Son is obedient to the plan of salvation by which the world will be redeemed. He doesn't just take pleasure in the Son as Son, He takes pleasure in the Son as servant who's going to do His Father's will all the way down in the waters of Jordan and through those waters to the cross.

The other part of Pope Benedict's description that caught my attention is...he says this:

The Baptism is an acceptance of death for the sins of humanity...

Jesus is already saying yes to the cross when He goes down in the water of the Jordan. And I can't help but think about the implications of that for our own Baptism. Because every single Christian is baptized into the death of Jesus. Paul says this in Romans 6:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4)

So Baptism is—sacramental Baptism—is a kind of co-crucifixion with Christ. We want to share with Him in His resurrection, we have to share with Him in His crucifixion. So when your parents—if you were an infant, if you were baptized as an infant. When your parents baptized you, they signed the contract for an acceptance of death on your behalf. But it's not a death that doesn't have meaning, because the suffering and death of a person who is in Christ participates in His salvific plan. It shares in His sufferings for the salvation of others. The baptized person lives in a way that's configured to Christ—Christ crucified and Christ raised from the dead.

So that's why Jesus, I think, does refer to His crucifixion as a Baptism...which is a weird way to talk about your death. You're going to be executed by asphyxiation on a cross. When John and James say:

“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

And Jesus says:

Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”

The reason He's saying that is because He sees His cross as the true Baptism, where He's going to be immersed not in the water of the Jordan but in the sufferings of the cross. And so on this feast of the Baptism of the Lord, let's remember that...remember the meaning of Jesus' Baptism as suffering servant and then also the fact that our Baptism calls us—each one of us—to be suffering servants as well.