

Homilies for the Baptism of the Lord:

- [For Justice' Sake, A Suffering Servant - Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)
- [Baptism of the Lord, cycle C - Don L. Fischer](#)

For Justice' Sake, A Suffering Servant

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

The baptism of the Lord. A fascinating story; a fascinating liturgy. The all-important question is: What are we celebrating? Perhaps more accurately, what should we be celebrating? A word first about the biblical story, then a word about you and me.

I

First, the biblical account of Jesus' baptism. There is something paradoxical about today's liturgy. You see, we call this feast "The Baptism of the Lord," but the focus of today's Gospel is not on Jesus' baptism. Oh yes, Jesus was baptized by John. Scripture scholars tell us "That Jesus was baptized by John is among the most certain historical facts in the Gospel tradition." But notice what the four evangelists do with it. It begins with Mark's straightforward account: Jesus was baptized, the heavens opened, the Spirit descended, the Father spoke (Mk 1:9-11). But once Mark's story got around, the baptism became an embarrassment to the early Church. Why? Perhaps because Christians thought it utterly unsuitable, clearly contradictory, for the sinless Jesus to be baptized for the remission of his sins. Perhaps because it seemed to put Jesus in a subordinate position with respect to John.

So what do the other three evangelists do? Matthew tries to soften the seeming scandal: He introduces an explanatory dialogue between Jesus and John, and he mentions the actual baptism with a simple participle, "having been baptized" (Mt 3:16). Luke puts Jesus' baptism in the middle of a sentence, in a subordinate clause: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus [also I had been baptized and was praying, the heavens opened]" (Lk 3:21). And John? John is so embarrassed by the baptism that he omits it entirely; he has the Baptist hailing Jesus as the Lamb of God, the Baptist making it quite clear that after him, after John, comes a man who ranks ahead of him (Jn 1:29-34). At any rate, today's Gospel has a different focus; all four evangelists have a different focus. It is only later in the Christian tradition that Jesus' baptism will become a model for Christian baptism, only later that Jesus' baptism will be seen as the first revelation of the Trinity, because Father, Son, and Spirit are seen as active together. What is the biblical focus? The person of Jesus: Who is he? Before Jesus begins his public ministry, it is necessary to make clear who he is and why he is significant.

How does Matthew accomplish this? The heavens are opened. What does this mean? Communication between heaven and earth is opened up, between God and humankind. This possibility is made concrete when the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus and a heavenly voice speaks. All three images-heavens opening, Spirit descending, voice speaking-prepare for one revelation: Who is this Jesus? The answer: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17). It is an allusion to our first reading, the passage from Isaiah:

Here is 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.

(Isa 42:1)

"My Son ... my servant." This unique Son of God is to be a unique servant, the Suffering Servant of God. In this unexpected sense he is to be the Messiah, the subject of the four Suffering Servant songs in Isaiah. Though utterly innocent, he will suffer horribly for his people. He is the Servant who "will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth..." (Isa 42:4).

II

Splendid scriptural stuff, you will say, but how does it touch you and me? One way struck me as soon as I linked the words from heaven in Matthew to the words of Yahweh in Isaiah. In our very baptism you and I are addressed in the words of our Lord:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon her (upon him);
She (he) will bring forth justice to the nations.

In the light of this first of the four Suffering Servant songs, three words challenge us: justice, servant, suffering.

Justice. As for Jesus, so for you and me: Not ours to "grow faint or be crushed until [we] have established justice in the earth." Not simply the justice that is human-giving each man, woman, and child what they can claim as a right: adequate food, decent housing, fitting education, humane work, respect for their dignity as images of God. Over and above all this, the justice that is divine: fidelity to relationships that stem from a covenant. A fidelity that is divine because God is always faithful to God's promises. A fidelity that must be ours, that introduces a fresh motivation, compels us to treat each man or woman as a brother or sister, to treat the downtrodden and the marginalized as if we were standing in their shoes. A fidelity that inspires us to love even our enemies as Jesus loves them, as Jesus has loved us. A fidelity that makes our own the mission of Jesus:

The Spirit of the lord is upon me,
because [the Lord] has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor,
has sent me to proclaim release for prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to send the downtrodden away relieved....

(Lk 4:18)

Servant. In doing justice, we take as spoken to us the pungent words of Jesus to the Twelve: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mt 20:25-28). Such is our privilege as disciples of Jesus.

The problem is, it isn't easy to see ourselves as servants, to act as servants, if we live in positions of power. If we can make decisions that affect the lives of others. If we can say "Do this" and people do it. If we haven't had to live powerless, begging for the bread we eat, unable to discover decent work, crippled and without health insurance, agonizing over our ill-fed children.

How did Jesus do it? Remember the man who vowed to follow Jesus wherever he might go? Jesus' answer makes me shiver: "I have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58). As one Scripture scholar phrases

it, Jesus "is en route; he lives the life of a homeless wand having no shelter, no home, no family—none of the things that pie usually consider requisite for ordinary life. Even animals are better off. "

There are indeed servants of justice who live like that. Dorothy Day did. Mother Teresa comes close. Perhaps Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw. But most of us do not seem called to so radical o style. What all of us are called to, I believe, is to share in some way the suffering of the less privileged. Which brings me to the third demand.

Suffering. As I look back on 81 years, I can hardly claim to I suffered. Oh yes, I have agonized: over the deaths of my father mother and only brother, over homilies and an irritable ileum, affronts to my pride. But not the suffering that afflicts parents wt children are hungry, the suffering that wastes the cancer-ridden the AIDS-afflicted, the suffering that agonizes the homeless and hopeless, the suffering that torments the drug-addicted, the hundred-and-one afflictions of flesh and spirit that threaten to dehumanize God's images on earth.

And still, if I am to preach effectively on divine justice human injustice, I have to experience to some extent, I have t least feel deeply, the agony of the crucified. It can happen in varied ways: cradling an infant with multiple sclerosis, embracing an HIV positive, serving the hungry at a soup kitchen, keeping a deathwatch with a family around a hospital bed—yes, even staring on TV into hopeless eyes of war-ravaged, war-orphaned children.

Simply, I must experience what the Gospels keep repeating about Jesus: "He had compassion." Its literal meaning? To "suffer with." Not pity; for pity looks down on another from a perch above. No. Compassion means I feel what another feels; I put myself in a brother's or sister's shoes; I am my brother, I am my sister. It's play-acting. What I felt when my only blood brother kept wasting away with cancer, that is what I feel when I see my brothers and sisters wasting away from "man's inhumanity to man."

Have I strayed from Jesus' baptism? Not really. My own baptism reveals my identity, tells the world who I am. I am, like Jesus, a servant sent to suffer for justice. And when I do, then the heavens open again, then the Holy Spirit descends dove-like, then the Father declares with pride, "You are my son/my daughter, whom I love. With you I am well pleased" (cf. Lk 3:22).

From Let Justice Roll down Like Waters © 1998 by the New York Province of the Society of Jesus. Published by Paulist Press.

Baptism of the Lord, cycle C

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Acts of the Apostles 10:34-38; Luke 3: 15-16, 21-22

The feast of the Baptism of the Lord relates an experience Jesus had that is very important for us to pay attention to. When we reflect on the teachings in the Bible about the baptism of Jesus and the baptism of John, we find the two are always compared. It's very important to understand what happened to Jesus—and therefore, what happens to us when we are baptized. By comparing Jesus' baptism to John's, we see a difference. What was different was John's role. Most people believe that what we receive is simply the baptism of John. The baptism of John can be described as a call for the person being baptized to discipline themselves to truly follow the way of God. That's an obviously wonderful and important step in the process of becoming what God wants us to be: To decide that we

want to do what is necessary to please our God. We want to follow the call of God, to do what the law requires.

John had a sense there was something missing in his baptism. He recognized that he was calling people to a kind of spiritual bath, a kind of cleansing with water. I like to imagine this is the call to every human being that comes from religion when we are asked basically to clean up our act. We are asked to straighten things out, to choose the things we know are better and to do them as best we can. The danger of that kind of “bath,” shaping ourselves up, is that without even realizing it we can fall into the very deadly trap of seeing it as a work we do. As we do this work, we are rewarded by God. If we do it well and see other people who are not doing it so well, we fall into another trap that the ego is so susceptible to—we compare ourselves and might even find ourselves saying, “Thank God, I am not like the rest of these people who are so crummy. I am better. I do everything right.” There is a wonderful passage in Scripture about the man who knelt in the temple and said to God, “Thank God I am better than the rest.” There was someone else there beating their breast and saying, “I am no good.” God said the one who pleased him was the one who was beating his breast and saying, “I am not worthy. I am not good enough.”

In the baptism of John, we sense a subtlety we need to be aware of concerning religion. Religion is not about a call for the ego to sharpen its skills and develop a fine-tuned machine called a believer. Something else is required. When we look at the image of the baptism of Jesus, we see something different. It’s about fire and spirit. Jesus is baptized in fire and the Holy Spirit. The image of fire has many levels, but one of the most common in religious imagery is of fire as a purifying agent that burns out everything that is not authentic and true. To imagine that we are better than anyone else is certainly not an authentic religious stance, but it is certainly an attitude we can easily fall into. It seems to me that the fire of the baptism of Jesus is something that doesn’t simply invite us to clean up our act. It is something that comes in and “cleans us out.” It transforms us. It burns that most dangerous disposition we can fall into: “I am in charge of my life, and I can make myself better than others and pleasing to God.” The danger of this kind of egocentric religion is that it falls prey to all kinds of devastating side effects: Things like jealousy, envy, and revenge. It also involves that self-righteousness that comes over a person who feels that their ego is better than others and that others are less than they are. Justice rages inside of people with inflated egos, and they feel they can do anything they want against people who are judged as less than they are.

In place of this development of the ego comes a purification of the ego and an incredible force that burns all that out—and leaves one aware of the deep, abiding presence of Spirit. Fire and Spirit are what we are baptized into. When we look at Jesus, it is so clear that Jesus went about his work with a focus. Jesus did not focus on his own perfection. He wasn’t constantly looking in the mirror, making sure he was the one doing everything perfectly so that everyone else saw him as perfection. He did almost the opposite. Jesus almost seemed to present himself as one who was not a good follower of the law. He was an outcast, presenting himself as one who didn’t necessarily pay attention to all of the conditioned requirements that religion demanded. He seemed to be freer than most people and not so afraid to be misunderstood. He didn’t seem to be so afraid to be judged. What he did was to show his intense desire to take people to a better place. He wanted to heal people. He wanted to strengthen them. He wanted to free people.

The first reading, from the book of the prophet Isaiah, is a beautiful passage about the

coming of a Messiah. This Messiah would come into the world and would partner with God. There's a wonderful image of God grasping the hand of the one who serves as he wishes them to serve. He connects with people, and he invites them to feel his power and strength. Listen to these images when the first reading says that what this Messiah has come to do is to "open the eyes of other people who are blind, to bring people who are imprisoned out of confinement, to lift people out of dark dungeons and to bring them into the light." That's a beautiful image of what a baptized person is invited to imagine that their baptism effects in them. It effects in them an openness, a purity, a burning out of that which blocks the work of the Spirit coming into them, so that they can become a vehicle of the gift of life to other people. The most interesting thing about a person who is baptized "well," if I can describe it that way in terms of a person who is open and receptive, is that this person seems to do the work without paying much attention to what it might demand in terms of response. He or she basically does the work with a kind of naturalness. They are just there to help, and they don't expect applause. They don't expect to be honored. They are simply doing the work of service because "it's what you do."

The fascinating aspect of an ego working to fine-tune itself and step back and see itself as better than others is that there is never any kind of real, true satisfaction in that kind of work. Anyone who focuses on getting their act together completely so that they can be presented to themselves and others as reaching a high level of perfection has a kind of emptiness. When we find ourselves adored by many people and we don't feel we are of value, all of that adoration seems to be valueless in terms of giving us a sense of importance. What does give us a sense of value and importance is our spirit connecting to our destiny. Our destiny ultimately is something that brings us to the place of wholeness. The wholeness we possess is the gift of God being the instrument inside of us, the vehicle that purifies and opens us to something that is really wonderful: The work of being a source of grace and strength to a waiting world. In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, when Peter is talking to the house of Cornelius about all the things he hopes they will be able to accept as the newly baptized, he describes the image that God has no favorites. There is no one God sees as more important than anyone else.

Isn't it interesting that this image of "no favorites" is a teaching that when the people first heard it, they were blown away by it? I don't hear it as something so earth-shattering, but it does make sense to me that if I was in the mode of being a person who was always struggling to be "better than," to be the model for, and looking down on those who don't follow this model—it does lead to a disposition of thinking it's all about favorites. It does lead to an attitude of thinking that God likes people who are doing the best job. The model is: "Be the best you can" so that you will be seen as that image of perfection and rewarded. When we get into this kind of image and realize God is saying, "No, it's not about this," that blows this whole system out of the water. It changes God's role with us. He is not a person who rewards us, but rather someone who simply and constantly invites us into doing the work we are called to do, the work of healing and bringing life to other people. I think it's amazing that this is not the work of the ego; it's always the work of the Spirit flowing through a kind of vessel that has been emptied. This vessel has been opened to be capable of doing something for other people.

This feast of the Baptism of the Lord is extremely important. We need to focus very much on what it is that our baptism calls us into. It's interesting that most of us, as Catholics, were baptized when we were very, very young. But I know that when I am part of the Easter Vigil service and I am baptizing at my church those who are adults entering into the church as people who have chosen this sacrament, it is very special. We celebrate

baptism by doing something that Roman Catholics have not done in a long time. We have a pool of water at the entrance of our church where two people can easily enter. The water comes up above our waists. I put my arm around these people to be baptized and when I pull them under the water, it is an awesome experience! I feel the fullness of the symbolism of this sacrament that has been preserved in so many other Christian churches. We have rediscovered and put into practice the way this sacrament was practiced in the early days of the Church. I really do feel a kind of death as those who are to be baptized go down into the water. When the newly baptized are lifted up, they stand in front of the community, and the community sings an “Alleluia” to them. It is so chilling and so wonderful, because it seems that this baptism is about a radical transformation, a death to what it is so often presumed that religion calls us to.

Baptism is a death to the ego. It’s a death to the inflation of the ego and an openness to this extraordinary ministry of being an instrument of God’s grace, light, and strength to people. There is a beautiful aspect of living in a disposition where we are really giving life instead of focusing on developing our life with a certain level of energy. There is something so healthy about not focusing solely on ourselves. It seems we are made to focus on other people. The more attention we give to ourselves, the more we focus on whether we are happy or not, attractive or not, effective or not, the more ridiculous it becomes. I have even asked myself a ridiculous question, even though it is clear what the answer is: Am I enough? Am I good enough? Am I holy enough? The answer is always, “No. There is always room for improvement.” It’s interesting that there doesn’t seem to be the potential for any kind of peace when we look at ourselves and focus on ourselves. But there is a wonderful opportunity for a sense of well-being when we focus on simply being an instrument of doing something for other people.

Anything that we ultimately want, if we give it someone else, we will get it. If we decide we want to take something from other people and we use them to get it—we never get it. When we love and really care for people, when we want to heal people and lift them out of darkness—that’s when we receive an enlightened spiritual state. When we go about a process of trying to get those things from other people, like their admiration or love, then we can’t do it very well. The challenge, then, is to enter into this extraordinary gift of our baptism. We recognize that John’s role is to point out that the life religion calls us into—a life of connecting to things—is not so much focused on cleaning up our act. It’s all about allowing the Spirit to fill us by first burning out all the egocentricity. Then, the Spirit engages us in a kind of unconscious presence. It’s unconscious in the sense that we don’t reflect on it all the time. We only reflect on it in the sense of simple service, of wanting to give people something that lifts them out of darkness. We seek to free others and to give them a sense of really seeing with eyes that are open to the truth.

© 2004, Don L. Fischer

Printed by Liturgy.com™

© OCP 2003-2009, All Rights Reserved.