

1 Epiphany C - 10 January 2010
Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
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Jesus' baptism provides tangible insight into a primary mystery of what it means to be in relationship with God. The Church's celebration of the occasion offers Christians an opportunity to examine this primary mystery which is the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Baptism is the normal way that people enter into relationship with God through the Christian faith and religion. And it is the normal way that people enter in relationship also with the community of their fellow Christians.

At its most mundane, baptism itself is defined simply as a dipping of something into a liquid. But in the ministry of John the Baptist, the word and the action to which it refers find profound meaning. More accurately, it is the mundane action of John that God endows with spiritual significance. It becomes baptism.

Without having to describe it or define it, people know generally what this means. God takes this simple symbolic act of dipping and attaches to it the power of the Holy Spirit of God and it becomes categorically something else altogether: a primary sacrament of the community of God's people. It becomes "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." This is the Prayer Book definition of a sacrament, see page 857 in the section marked 'Catechism.'

And though baptism is outwardly recognizable to most people having attended a baptism service in church, or maybe just having seen it portrayed on a Funniest Home Video show or a in famous gangster movie, Holy Baptism remains a mystery in the sense that the purpose for it is often misunderstood or overlooked, beyond simply honoring the tradition. Add to this the mystery of whatever could be the purpose for Jesus Christ himself being baptized, and Holy Baptism really is a complete mystery.

I read a story about a baptism. Dad, Mom, and seven year-old son Dennis set off to church one Sunday, with the newest addition: baby sister, Heather. Dennis notices that his baby sister is dressed rather differently today from her normal one-zie. "Today," Dad explains, "we are having Heather baptized, just like we did with you when you were just a baby." "Oh," says Dennis. He is not quite

sure what this means, but he is content to wait and see what happens.

Interestingly, I think, this is pretty much the way it is with a sacrament. After the administration of the outward and visible sign, people just have to wait and see. The outward and audible sign that the God's people here is the promise that God will gather them and make them God's own. "I have redeemed you," God says through the prophet Isaiah. "So, do not be afraid." "I have redeemed you," says God; "and I have called you by name, and I have you made you mine." So, whatever their circumstance, the fact remains, they are God's chosen, and that means something. It's just that right now in their life, they have to wait and see what that 'something' is.

"Do not be afraid," God tells them. The people are being enslaved by enemy empires, and all around them. Each of them is hearing about or seeing for himself or herself friends and neighbors being taken away. And each is afraid that the same things is in store for him or for her. Like a raging flood, the enemy is coming at them. Like a raging wildfire, the enemy is destroying behind it. And so, God tells the people, "I am right here with you. I will not let you drown in defeat, or choke on hatred, theirs or your own. I am with you," says God. And the people now just have to wait to see what all this means.

At church, Dad, Mom, and son Dennis are there to bring baby sister Heather to be baptized. The priest speaks to the congregation, and at one point even directly to the family, about the event and the meaning of little Heather's baptism. Big-brother Dennis is paying close and serious attention to every word.

At the appropriate moment in the worship service, the priest calls for the family to come forward. The priest takes the baby and holds her carefully just above the baptismal font. Dipping a silver shell into the water three times, and each time pouring the water gently across the baby's forehead, the priest says, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Mom and Dad receive Heather back from the priest, little Dennis is almost in tears himself. They realize that he has never

before seen a baptism, and this seems to have made quite an impact on him.

That baptisms are intended to make an impact on people, I think this is a given. Just what sort of impact, this is not always so clear. The Church baptizes in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This matters, but to be honest, it is difficult to explain fully why. The episode related in the book of Acts and that we hear today helps a bit. The apostles Peter and John head off to visit some new Christians located in a regions of the country other than their own. The writer tells us that the new Christians have received the word of God. They have welcomed the Good News that God has sent the savior and that Jesus was raised from death and reunited with God in heaven, and that this makes the way for all people to live fully and eternally in union with God. They have not, however, yet received the Holy Spirit.

So, these two chief apostles of Jesus come to them to 'complete', if you will, the initiation of these new Christians fully into fellowship God and God's people. In one sense this is akin to what has evolved into the practice of bishops in the Church visiting with congregations periodically and officiating at the Rite of Confirmation. It is the occasion for a bishop to confirm that baptized persons presented to them are indeed Christians and are recognized by the wider Church as such.

But this story also helps remind us in a way of why we make sure to baptize new Christians in the triune Name of God: i.e. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is a reminder to ourselves and to the newly baptized that God is more than can be adequately represented by speaking of God the Father, or of God, Son of the Father, or of God the Holy Spirit coming forth from God the Father and God the Son and moving to us, in us, and through us. We baptize in the normative name of God the Holy Trinity in order to remind ourselves that God is more than we can contain with names, and also that God has given us names with which to know God better.

We name God as fully as possible to remind us that we want each of us to experience the countless blessings of knowing God as fully as possible. And we name the baptized person in the service to remind each of us of the blessing of being known *by* God personally, by

name. This is what happens for the first time, ever, at the baptism of Jesus.

At Jesus' baptism, God the Father in Heaven identifies him specifically as God the Son. And the Holy Spirit of God appears and effectively seals the witness of God the Father with its own. No longer is the dipping of people in water a largely anonymous and ceremonial act of symbolic purification. No longer is merely concerned with a symbolic cleansing of those who have religious defiled themselves by touching, perhaps, foods or even people deemed by the authorities to be spiritually unclean. Now, with Jesus, and then for all those who will follow him afterward, baptism becomes something personal, something lasting, and something in which God is tangibly involved.

After the holy baptism of his sister in church, little Dennis is sobbing all the way home in the back seat of the car. Three times, Dad asks him what is wrong. Finally, Dennis explains. "Well," he says, "I heard that priest today say that he wants Heather and me to be brought up in a good Christian home." "Well, yes," Dad says. "So, what's the problem?" "Well," says Dennis, and he starts sobbing harder; "I just want to stay with you and Mom!"

Jesus own baptism gives us insight into the mystery of this outward and visible sign of this spiritual and inward blessing. God's blessing upon Jesus is God's blessing upon you and me: it is that 'something' that is both an inward and spiritual blessing that becomes, while we wait and watch, an outward and visible reality. It is in God in these fellow baptized all around us, raising us up in the community of God's people, this good and Christ-like home, and saying to each of us, "I am with you." It is God within us telling world around us, "I am calling you and you are mine." It is God within you and me personally, each of us beloved of God, and it is all of us together, a people with whom God is very well-pleased.

And so may Almighty God by whose grace we have entered into the death and resurrection of Jesus, grant that, bearing Christ's name and sharing in Christ's ministry, we may come into the eternal glory of Christ our Lord, who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, now and for ever. Amen.