

Historically this is an important weekend for the Catholic Church. On Friday they celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord, or the beginning of the appearance of the Lord. Often it coincides with the three wise men honoring Jesus. Then you fast forward 30 years, and you celebrate the Baptism of Jesus.

Protestant churches recognize the Baptism of Jesus as it is the inauguration of Jesus public ministry. John the Baptist has been baptizing. There is no mention of baptism in the Old Testament but there are examples of people being cleansed from illness with water. The Apostles also recognize the flood as a form of baptism.

In Isaiah 1:16 there is the command to "wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My (God's) eyes." This also fits the baptism of repentance done by John. In Jeremiah 4:14, the people are told to wash their hearts from wickedness, that they may be saved. Ceremonially, that may be why John was baptizing.

John was preaching repentance and took the cleansing in water as a symbol of sincere repentance and cleansing. Jesus enters the scene and John proclaims, "This is the one I have been preaching." Jesus goes to be baptized and John does not want to do it. Jesus does not need baptism. But Jesus insists, probably for us to identify with him, and during the baptism some amazing things happen.

Let us read, from Mark 1:4-11

*<sup>4</sup> John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." <sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

It has been called a God-shaped hole in our soul. One of the ways that hole expresses itself is through our questions. The big "Life Questions": Who am I? Why am I here? What is of value in my life? Is there a plan and purpose for me? If we try to fill that hole with anything other than God, a sin-sick soul results. These questions can be answered only by asking another question: Whose am I? Or, to what or whom do I belong?

In our faith story the question is answered by the One, who says, "You belong to me. I will teach you this truth by belonging to you." "Noah, you are mine. There is a flood coming. Build an ark." "Abraham and Sarah, you are mine. Leave your home and I will lead you to a land flowing with milk and honey. I will make of your descendants a great nation. It will be a light to all the nations. "Jacob, you are mine. You will no longer be called Heel-grabber, Conniver, Trickster. You will be called Israel, which means, the one who contends, wrestles, strives with God." A voice from a burning bush said, "Moses, you are mine. Go to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let my people go. "Mary, you are mine. You will conceive by the Holy Spirit and bear the Son of God." "Joseph, you are mine. Do not divorce Mary, for her baby has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. When the baby is born, name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sin-sick souls."

Whose are we? How are we to live? Why doesn't God answer us by speaking to us as he spoke in biblical times to Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Moses, Mary, and Joseph.

Our faith story is a story about what the Celtic tradition calls "thin places" or "thin spaces." They are where the heavenly penetrates the earthly. They are where people experience moments of a deep sense of God's presence. They are when people "see the Light." Or hear the Voice. They trust and obey what is revealed to them.

But we don't often have those kinds of revelations. We may never have those revelations. But we have a model and we can identify with it. It teaches us that as Jesus was the beloved child, we too are the beloved child. When the biblical witnesses speak of the presence of God, they are making a profession of faith. They are saying, "What we have seen we recognize as of God. It is self-authenticating. Self-validating. We can't prove it. We can only testify to our experience and how it has affected us." The baptism of the person is one of those thin spaces where the heavenly intersects the earthly. It is an experience of the veil being pulled back, so we might see and hear the truth about Jesus. And when we see and hear the truth about Jesus, we become aware of the truth about ourselves.

John is baptizing one person after another in the Jordan: "Next...next...next." Then whoa. He becomes aware of Jesus: "I shouldn't be baptizing you. You should be baptizing me." To John's protest, Jesus says, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

So how does Jesus' coming to John for baptism fulfill all righteousness? God's love for us is expressed by becoming one with us, by identifying with us, by entering into solidarity with us, so that Jesus knows fully the life we know. He willingly suffers with and for those whom God loves.

When Jesus submitted to John's baptism, the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit dove descended, and the voice from heaven declared the truth about Jesus to all space and time: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." That day at the Jordan River was one of those "thin places," where heaven and earth met. The veil was pulled back for the truth to be seen and heard.

It was true for Jesus and it is true for us. On God's behalf, the Church, when it baptizes God's children, declares God's truth about them. It says to every child, youth, and adult, "This is God's child, God's Beloved, and this child brings God pleasure." When we know Who loves us and enjoys us, a faith that cannot be extinguished is lit within us that shines through us. When God says to His Son, "I am proud of you," He commends His character, honors His achievements, and encourages Him for the future.

Our lesson is simple. God not only anoints Jesus for service, but also gives to His Son the strengths of identity, security, and confidence when He says, "I claim you, I love you, I am proud of you." Jesus' credentials now include the affirmation of God the Father to go along with the announcement of John the Baptist.

And in our baptism we are put in the same position. We do not hear it. We experience it over time as we grow in relationship. It may start as a raging fire or a small spark but that does not matter. The importance is that every time we join together to baptize a person, child or adult, we all hear again, the words of God to each of us. This is my child, I am well pleased. This is good news. Amen.