

## Homily for Sunday, January 11, 2025 (Baptism of the Lord)

With sunset today (Sunday), the Christmas Season comes to an end. On this feast of the Baptism of the Lord, a couple of questions linger. Firstly, why is the baptism



of Jesus, who is somewhere between the age of 30 and 33, placed in the Christmas Season? It doesn't seem to fit in the storyline of a baby laid in a manger attracting the attention of shepherds,

wisemen and angels. The second puzzling thing is: Why is Jesus, the sinless one, in the waters meant for the washing away of sins? I suppose if we can get a grasp on why Jesus is in these waters for the washing away of sins, we might simultaneously home in on why Jesus, the innocent one, is crucified between two thieves and why Jesus, the pure one, hangs out with impure lepers and prostitutes.

Christmas stories are stories of epiphany; and epiphany means "revelation"; something is revealed. What is revealed is the truth about God. This truth, this mystery--St. Paul told us last weekend--was hidden from humanity but is now revealed in Jesus. So, if we can figure out what is being revealed in Jesus' baptism, we might be able to answer the question why this story is given to us in the Christmas Season and why Jesus is being baptized at all.

Isaiah was a powerful prophet who lived some 700 years before the birth of Jesus. Obviously, he had no personal knowledge of Jesus. Nevertheless, Isaiah speaks of a Servant. The Servant is Israel, God's Chosen People. In spite of that, when we hear it with our Christian ears, we automatically think he's talking about Jesus, who certainly fits the description of a servant. God, speaking to Isaiah, says about Israel, "Here's my servant, the one whom I am backing to the hilt. I've put my spirit upon him. He won't cry out or lift his voice nor will he break a bruised reed or snuff out a dimly burning wick. He will faithfully bring forth justice, etc." Isaiah goes on to say that if Israel is pleasing to God and is a faithful Servant of God, then Israel will be seen as a light to the nations, to the entire world. As a Christian, I was raised to believe Jesus is the light to the nations. I never saw Israel being challenged to be that as well. But then again, I rarely saw *myself* or the *Church* being called to be the light for those in darkness. It was always just a job Jesus was supposed to do. Now I realize it's my job as well.

Matthew, the gospel writer, wants his readers to see Jesus as being the fulfillment of everything the prophets pointed to. For Matthew, Jesus is the one whom God has placed his spirit. At Jesus' baptism it says, "the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus like a dove." And when Isaiah speaks about this Servant not crying out or lifting his voice or make it heard in the streets, again, it certainly sounds like Jesus. Jesus did nothing to promote or draw attention to himself with public displays. He let his calm words and healing touch do the speaking. In fact, there was so little self-promotion in Jesus, that every time he performed a miracle, he follow it with, "Don't tell anyone."

Through the Prophet Isaiah, God goes on to say that Israel—God’s Chosen People—should not break a bruised reed nor quench a burning wick. Again, it certainly feels like this prophecy has been fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus never broke a bruised reed. He had no need to put anyone down or to keep anyone down. He lifted up the bruised people of this world wherever he found them. Jesus never snuffed out a burning wick. Even when people were considered small, insignificant, and disposable, Jesus found a way of blowing the weak flicker of their lives into a roaring fire. Nobody was considered a “nobody” in Jesus’ world. He never cut his losses and moved on from a person or a group of people saying, “They’re so pathetic, I can’t do a thing with them.”

Peter was correct when he said in that second reading, ***“I truly understand that God shows no partiality.”*** God plays no favorites. If that’s so, I might have to ditch a tee-shirt I bought a couple of years ago in Lunenburg that clearly says across the front, *“Jesus loves you, but I’m his favorite.”* There are no superior nor inferior people in God’s kingdom. Jesus doesn’t even see himself as God’s favorite. Everything that you and I will undergo, he’s willing to undergo it himself, including suffering and dying. Yet, somehow in our minds we secretly think God loved his Son 100%, Mother Teresa 99%, St. Francis 98% and so on down the line until he come to us. On a good day, we might deserve 27%, and the rotten S.O.B. who sold you your last car, the lemon, probably gets 4%. That world and those statistics do not exist. Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.” It’s 100% for me, and it’s 100% for everyone. There are no favorites. Jesus does not even take privilege for himself, even though he is the Son of God.

That's probably why he's in the waters of baptism. He's one of us. The traditional Christmas stories we heard over the last couple of weeks reminded us that Jesus is called "Emmanuel" which means "God with us." He's one of us.

When John the Baptist initially recoils at the suggestion that he should baptize Jesus, I think his hesitation had to do with some kind of role reversal that John wasn't comfortable with. It's the same kind of hesitation on Peter's part when Jesus moves toward Peter to wash his feet at the Last Supper. Peter doesn't like it any more than John the Baptist likes it. Both Peter and John have serious objections because they live in the world governed by superiority and inferiority where Jesus is definitely seen as superior to them. Jesus doesn't see it that way. He tells John at the baptism exactly what he tells Peter at the foot-washing, "I know you don't get it, but just let it be. A revelation of God is about to take place. Someday, you'll understand the revelation and why it had to be this way." Jesus answered John the Baptist by saying, "I know you think I should be baptizing you, instead of you baptizing me, but let it be for now. This is to ***fulfill all righteousness.***"

When something is righteous, it means it's aligned with God's will. This is what God wants, even if we don't get it, don't want it, or don't even understand it. Righteousness means this is what God wants right here and now, in this place and in this time.

I remember being on a vocation-discernment retreat 43 years ago with a bunch of young adult men and women. The retreat master, Fr. Blair, told us not to ask the

question, “What is God’s will for me?” It’s a good question but almost impossible to answer. To answer it we would have to presume to know the mind of God when most of us don’t even understand our own little minds. He suggested we ask instead, “What is the most loving response I can make, here and now, (not tomorrow or next year) to the fact that God has loved me so much?” To that question, you will always find an answer.

I believe Jesus asked himself that question prior to being baptized. The most loving response Jesus could make was to go under the water. It was to fulfill all righteousness. Righteousness means what God wants right here and now. What God wanted, what Jesus discerned, was that Jesus should dive into everything of what it meant to be human. Jesus entered the waters conscious that he was the Son of Joseph born in the city of David. He exited the water with the tremendous consciousness that he was Son of God. No objection could stop the baptism from happening. No objection could stop Jesus from washing his Apostles’ feet. No objection could stop the incarnation from happening. If it’s true of Jesus, it’s true of you and me. We, too, are sons/daughters of the earth, and simultaneously sons/daughters of the divine. Just like Jesus, you are fully human and fully divine. You want to become more spiritual for 2026? Become more human. By becoming more human, we hold together the paradoxes of life—the good with the bad, the pure with the impure, the sin with the grace, sickness with health, the rich and the poor. And when you can do that, you’ll finally understand why Jesus had to be baptized.

*~Fr. Phil*