

Sunday After Epiphany 2023

Baptism of Our Lord

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*Isaiah 42:1-9, Psalm 89, Acts 10:34-38, Matthew 3:13-17*

In the book, "How to Read Literature Like a Professor," Thomas C. Foster teaches readers clues to look for when reading a novel. I often assign this to High School students first learning to interpret literature. He says that great literature often alludes to other great literature and the primary sources for Western Literature are the Bible, Ancient Greco-Roman mythology, and Shakespeare. Baptism is one common Biblical image in literature.

Foster suggests that if a character goes under water and comes back out, it could be a baptism. He says that water, rain, and even snow can be an image of baptism in literature. We look to see if something changes in the character's life after the symbolic baptism.

One of the things I like about this book is that Foster explores how certain actions in literature allude to one or more other stories that precede it. This way of thinking can help us consider the Baptism of Jesus.

In our Gospel today, Jesus asks John to baptize him. This unexpected request catches John off guard and he almost refuses. Jesus persists; John obeys; and the heavens open.

This baptism alludes to several Old Testament stories more than we can cover today. First, there is the crossing of the Jordan. When the children of Israel come to the end of their wilderness wandering, they must cross the Jordan river to enter the wilderness. The Levites carry the Ark of the Covenant into the Jordan, and the river halts. The children of Israel cross the Jordan on dry ground. This crossing marks the end of their wilderness wandering and the beginning of their life on the land of future promise.

In the gospel today, John goes outside of Judea and Jerusalem, invites people to confess their sins and be baptized in the river Jordan. He is inviting them into a symbolic act. In some sense to suggest that they have not been living in the promised land, they are renouncing their sin, which has caused them to wander away from the things of God. As they are baptized in the Jordan, they are being purified to walk in the way of righteousness.

When Jesus requests to be baptized, John is shocked. For John this implies that Jesus needs to repent of His sin, and that Jesus is seeking a new life through John. But Jesus responds to John, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."<sup>1</sup> Jesus is pointing John toward another story. He is helping John to see another meaning in this act.

To understand the allusion, we look at Isaiah 42. "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

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 3:15.

the nations.”<sup>2</sup> Isaiah is drawing from Moses’s call to Israel. In Deuteronomy 16:20, Moses tells the children of Israel, “Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”<sup>3</sup>

He says that the servant of the Lord will bring justice to the nations. This justice will be so gentle that it won’t crush the very weakest such as a bruised reed or a faintly burning wick. This servant will be faithful. This servant will not grow faint or discouraged until His justice has extended to all the earth.

Who is the servant that Isaiah references? It could be an individual, but it simultaneously could also be the nation of Israel because the nation of Israel is the servant of the Lord. There's an interesting pattern in the Old Testament where some individuals represent Israel, they stand in on behalf of the whole nation.

Moses stands in place of Israel. He’s the individual that stands as the covenant bearer on behalf of the people. From the Psalms we can see that the King stands in place of the people.

When Isaiah speaks of a servant, it could be an individual or could be an entire community. This servant “will bring forth justice to the nations.” This line is actually an allusion to Moses' sermon in Deuteronomy 16:20 when he tells the children of Israel, "Justice and only justice you shall follow that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you."

The children of Israel are called as the servant of the Lord. The entire people, the servant of the Lord. They are a nation called to reveal God's glory. They are to reveal the goodness and a love of God in everyday life as well as in worship. The Torah or the commandments are teaching them how to be that covenant people, how to be a people that bear witness to the faithfulness of God.

We know the story doesn't work out quite that way. The people are unfaithful, so they end up revealing something else. They reveal the sinfulness of humanity. Israel has two roles of revealing. They're revealing the glory of God and the sinfulness of humans. If we read the story of the people across the Old Testament, we find the people chosen by God are idolaters, they follow the gods of other nations. And there's all sorts of perversions that go with that behavior.

They become oppressors and take advantage of the weak and poor. Israel’s sins are so egregious that the prophets suggest that they are worse than Sodom and Gomorrah. Israel has failed to reveal God’s justice to the world. Yet Isaiah continues to speak of Israel as the servant of the Lord.

Instead of abandoning Israel, the Lord promises that His work of justice will be revealed. In verses 6-8 we read,

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<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 42:1.

<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Dt 16:20.

<sup>6</sup> *“I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations,<sup>7</sup> to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.<sup>8</sup> I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.”<sup>4</sup>*

God’s commitment to reveal His glory through Israel remains. And yet, Israel continues to rebel. In Isaiah 59, we read,

<sup>14</sup> *Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands far away; for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter.<sup>15</sup> Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey. The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice.<sup>16</sup> He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him.<sup>5</sup>*

Isaiah prophesies that God now will be the one who fulfills the covenant. He's the one who will bring justice to the nations. Now that gets us ready for today's gospel.

When baptizing the repentant Jews, John sees Jesus coming toward him. John acknowledges His greatness, proclaiming, “He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”<sup>6</sup>

Jesus shocks John when He asks John to baptize Him. This does not make sense to John. It is almost blasphemous for John to consider baptizing the Holy One who has come. John says, “I need to be baptized by you.” Jesus insists. He says, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”<sup>7</sup> God’s own arm is working righteousness.

Now John obeys. John’s submission is a sign of his ever willingness to turn and follow that is to repent. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis writes, [John the Baptist] shows himself to be in a permanent attitude of *metanoia*, which is precisely what he demanded of others. Even though it is John himself who performs Jesus’ baptism, John is conscious of the fact that, by a mysterious reversal, the power of sanctification is coming to his hand from Jesus rather than going out of it to an ordinary penitent.”<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the whole event, Christ is blessing. He blesses John the Baptist; He blesses the River Jordan; He blesses all who behold this event including us. Jesus connects the baptism to prophecies about His coming. He is fulfilling the covenant with Israel. In fact, Jesus now is the Israel of God, and through the gospels He is the Israel of God and He's fulfilling every aspect of

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<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 42:6–8.

<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 59:14–16.

<sup>6</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 3:11.

<sup>7</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 3:15.

<sup>8</sup> Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, Chapters 1–25*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996–2012), 132.

the story of Israel. God has entered the story of Israel through his son Jesus Christ, who's fully man and fully God. He's the covenant promise.

As the servant of the Lord, He will reveal the call of Israel to reveal the justice of God to the nations. He will faithfully bring justice even to the frailest weakest ones who might be likened to a bruised reed or a flickering wick. He will face rejection, hatred, betrayal, and eventual crucifixion, but His commitment to justice will prevail to all the earth.

Jesus descends to the Jordan and descends in a sense to death. Then he ascends from the water. The sky opens and the Father and Spirit embrace the Son, affirming His descent and ascent. The True Israel of God has reaffirmed the covenant between God and His people. As Jesus stands in the Jordan, He is also the Ark of Covenant standing in the Jordan and making a people for God's people enter the land of God's Promise.

The Ark of the Covenant makes a way. It bears the covenant between God and Israel. Jesus is standing in the river Jordan as the one bearing the covenant between God and His people. And now through Christ we can cross the Jordan into the land of promise, which is what Hebrews 4 tells us, that Joshua could not lead them into the land of promise. He couldn't lead them into the land of rest, but Jesus can.

We see Jesus standing right there in the middle of the river Jordan. He is our way. As we meditate upon this baptism this morning, we're reminded that the Lord comes to us just the way He came to John the Baptist. He calls us to follow him, which sometimes means when we feel called in certain actions or certain things to say or do, we may resist it at first, we may not even recognize it because that's the way of the Spirit.

As we meditate upon this baptism this morning, we are reminded that the Lord comes to us even as He came to John the Baptist. He calls us to follow Him.

We are also reminded of our own baptism. Our baptism is a baptism into Christ. We enter the covenant of God and the land of future promise through Jesus Christ. In Him, we cross the Jordan.

Our baptism is also our obedience to His call. We want that readiness to turn sometimes unexpectedly in the way He calls us. In an age when faith seems foolish and is often misunderstood, we follow Christ by descending into the place of humility.

In a time of shouting factions, we model the way of Christ by serving others in love. We speak as He leads us. Darrell Johnson once said that "Evangelism is entering a conversation God is having with someone...when invited." Let us open our hearts and lives to the wind of the Spirit. That we might be instruments of God's goodness, God's justice in the world. May we not lose hope or grow discouraged but continue to live as witnesses of His righteousness and healing grace to the ends of all the earth.