

# The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

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On January 8th we will celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, the first Sunday after the Epiphany. This season often gets left behind in the humble abode in Bethlehem where we have followed our three mysterious kings, and in our minds brings an end to the Christmas season. In fact, this day is one of the great feast days of the Church, a more ancient festival than the celebration of the Epiphany season itself.

It might seem anticlimactic following on the heels of a lengthy period of preparation and elaborate celebration of Advent and Christmas. Historically, these two seasons get summed up in a great Twelfth Night or Epiphany Party. For years this has been the custom in our own family.

And yet this feast day, The Baptism of Our Lord, is actually the pivotal one linking together the Nativity story of Christmas and the Paschal mystery of Easter towards which we turn in our liturgical celebration.

Each of today's lessons tells a pivotal moment in this divine drama. In the first reading (Isaiah 42:1-9) we have the first of the "servant songs" in which the long-hoped-for Messiah is promised, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight, I have bestowed my spirit upon him."

The Psalmist, speaking of God's covenant with David to be fulfilled in the messianic promise (Psalm 29), is told that he will be named as God's "first born - highest among the kings of the earth."

The story in Acts 10:34-43 tells of the missionary zeal of the early church in bringing this Good News of the Messiah, the King of Kings and servant King - not only to the household of Israel but to the Gentile world as well. The conversion of Cornelius marks an important turning point in which the Holy Spirit has broken through with a clear new direction, and Peter preaches to this Gentile convert of how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power."

In Mark's Gospel (1:7-11) which is the focal point of this feast day, we have the actual story of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. "And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove, and a voice from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved son, with thee I am well pleased.'"

This public affirmation and blessing marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, although the full meaning and nature of his mission was not understood by those around him, save John alone.

Yet is was an Epiphany - a bursting forth, a revelation of Jesus as messianic king and spirit-filled servant - summed up in the simple but powerful words, "Thou art my beloved Son, with thee I am well pleased," or as the New English Bible says it, "Thou art my Son, my beloved, on thee my favor rests."

This day commemorates a pivotal event for each of us also. It is a day in which we not only remember the baptism of Jesus, but remember and celebrate our own. In the Episcopal tradition, this is one of the several feast days designated for baptism (the others being the Easter Vigil, the Day of Pentecost, and All Saints' Sunday). On this day we may be rejoicing in the baptism of the newest members of our church, most often infants. We also renew our own baptismal promises.

These promises are our response to God's grace and great act of love. It's our own way of saying "Thank you" for the gifts of the Incarnation - God living among us - and the ongoing celebration of connecting Advent, Christmas and Epiphany together.

*Genelda Woggon has been ministered to and by children for over 40 years in her professional work as a Christian Formation Leader, most especially through the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd for the past 20 years. She coordinates the work of the Catechesis at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Asheville, NC and also serves as Consultant for the Catechesis in the Diocese of Western North Carolina.*