

## Baptism and St. John the Baptist



Gospel of St. Mark 1: 4-11—“*John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, ‘After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit,’* Now in those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the 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 came from heaven, ‘Thou art my beloved Son; with whom I am well pleased.’”

Today is the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus, a momentous time in His Life, and one that is the beginning of His Ministry. That Ministry began with His baptism, just as did ours.

The Gospel for this morning illustrates that. It shows St. John the Baptist out there next to the Jordan River, preaching and baptizing. All very nice, I suppose—but why? Why out in the wilderness? And why baptizing? And why was he dressed in such a manner? And locusts? Talk about being different!

To understand what he was doing, we have to go way back in history—back to the time of Moses and Joshua.

Do you remember from your reading of the Old Testament that the Jewish people had to break out of Egypt, to freedom into the desert? Moses had led the people of Israel across the Reed Sea, and into Saudi Arabia to Mount Horeb, when they received the Ten Commandments—a fantastic breakthrough for humanity, and the first time in history that Morality and Religion had been connected. The Jewish people then journeyed to what they hoped would be their promised land but were afraid to cross the Jordan to take possession. Because of their fears, God condemned them to wander in the wilderness for 40 years, until the old generation had died, and been replaced by a new generation of younger people, who were ready and eager to cross into the promised land. They gathered on one side of the Jordan, which is a river no more than 100 or so feet across and quite shallow—and made ready. Moses turned over leadership to Joshua, and then on command, the priests stepped into the Jordan River, carrying the Ark of the Covenant

on their shoulders, and stood in the middle of the river while the whole nation of people forged past them and gathered on the other side—on the land that would become the land of Israel. They took possession of their Promised Land and promised to live a new life of faith and loyalty to God. It was a defining moment in Jewish history.

Now, let's move forward to the time of John the Baptist. The country was under the control of the Roman legions, and the religion of the Jews had become a religion of Keeping Rules (613 of them), rather than a vigorous and lively Faith in God. Of course, the people still paid lip service to God, and there were some very religious people, like the Pharisees and Essenes, but most people essentially ran their lives without regard to God, sinning like any gentiles. Judaism was at a low ebb, even though the sacrifices in the Temple continued. Judaism had not had a Prophet for over 300 years, and people wondered if God had deserted them—though it was more likely that they had deserted God.

And then, John appeared in the wilderness, beside the Jordan in the southern part of Israel, preaching that the people needed to repent of their sins, renew their Faith, and look forward to the coming of the Messiah. News of his preaching spread like wildfire throughout Judea. Was this a new prophet? He certainly sounded like one—and dressed like one. He even ate the food of the poor—beans from the locust tree and wild honey. Thousands of people journeyed to the Israeli side of the Jordan River to see and hear this Prophet, who preached from the wilderness side (Jordanian side) of the Jordan. St. John was a dynamic preacher. The whole country had deserted God, he said, and fallen into sin—God would condemn them all, because the Messiah was almost here. Who would recognise Him? Who was prepared to repent?

Those who wanted to repent of their part in their sinful society, waded across the Jordan to join St. John on the wilderness side, knelt down and confessed their sins there and then. Then as they stepped back into the water, John poured water on their heads as a token of absolution. (People weren't dunked—they stood as the water was poured on their heads. Pictures from that time show us how it was done.) Now, renewed and forgiven, each of them joyously waded back through the Jordan, as their ancestors had done centuries before, pledged to live lives of faithfulness to God, as had their ancestors under Joshua. It was a dramatic time for each of them. Following their "baptism," wading back across the Jordan was symbolic of their retaking possession of the Promised Land. Renewed in their Faith, they wanted to rebuild the community of God, so they would be ready to greet the Messiah, who was almost here. It was a time of Renewal of Faith, and St. John the Baptist was at the centre of it all.

[As an aside, Baptism in the Early Church was done in a shallow pool in the centre of the courtyard of a house which was being used for worship. We know this from pictures of Baptisms left by the early Christians. Those who were being Baptised were led to one side of the shallow pool, made a confession of their Faith in Jesus as Lord, and then were stripped. They stepped naked into the pool of water, and either stood or knelt as water was poured over them 3 times by the Deacon. Of course, women were Baptised separately by Deaconesses. The newly Baptised stepped out of the opposite side of the pool (as if they had forded the Jordan River) and were immediately clad in a new white

alb that was of bleached cotton to symbolize that they were cleansed of sin and stood clean before the Lord. The newly Baptised was then Anointed with Oil for the reception of the Holy Spirit, and finally taught the Lord's Prayer for the first time. After thanksgivings for the Gift of Life Eternal, he/she was led into the main hall of the house and ushered up to the bishop sitting before the Altar, before whom they knelt and received the Laying on of Hands (Confirmation) for the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the beginning of their Ministry. The newly Baptised then joined with the rest of the congregation in Offering the Holy Sacrifice at the Altar and received their First Communion. The practise of Baptising by submerging a person under the water was begun in the 16th century by protestants who were trying to follow an illustration by St Paul, interpreted from the New Testament.]

And then it happened. Jesus arrived from Nazareth, from the north of Israel, asking to be baptised. No said St. John, you have no sin. If anything, I should be baptised by you, not the other way around. But Jesus prevailed on John to baptize Him anyways as, he said, for the Beginning of His Ministry. As Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit fell upon Him in a dramatic and dynamic way. Jesus knew it, and John saw it. Jesus was identifying with the New Commitment of Faith that was growing from St John's witness. For Jesus knew, in some way, that He was the promised Messiah. And so did John.

The Church has continued Baptism from the very beginning. The Apostles taught us that Baptism would cleanse us of sin, begin our Christian life, and anoint us with the Holy Spirit. Jesus our Saviour taught his disciples that God loves us, wants us to repent and return to Him, and desires us to walk with Him until we have become the Saints of God. Our Baptism into Christ is the beginning of that lifelong process, just as being baptized and fording the Jordan River was the beginning of the process of retaking the Promised Land for the Jews. Baptism is our new Birth into our Spiritual Life with Christ—the start of the process of becoming our destiny. We are all in that process of growth right now, a growth that began with our Baptism and ends in Heaven with Jesus.



When you were Baptised, you entered into a Movement—a Movement to build the Kingdom of God—a Movement founded and headed by Jesus—a Movement meant to change this world. This Movement creates a New Community called the Church, a New People called the People of God, and a New Relationship with the Father. You are now an adopted son or daughter of God, and a brother or sister of each other. All we who are Baptised belong to one another, and all are special in the eyes of God. Jesus died for each of us and shed His blood so that our Relationship with the Father will be Eternal. With our Baptism, we receive the Gift of Eternal Life, and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Through Baptism we entered into our Spiritual Life of Growth in Christ—and our destiny is to each become a Saint of God. Our Baptism began all that for us. So let us today, as we approach the Altar to offer His Holy Sacrifice, turn in thanksgiving to the God who loves us so much—to the Lord who died and rose for us—and to the Holy Spirit who fortifies us with the Grace of God. We are loved. We belong.

We have a Destiny. We have crossed our Jordan, and the Kingdom of God lies before us. Alleluia.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.