

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22
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Jan. 10, 2010 Why Baptism?
Homily 143
Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11, Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Caleb is 9 years old. His mother called to him that it was time for bed and not to forget your prayers.” “Ah, mom,” he said, “it’s not time to go to bed yet, besides I’m not done with the game yet.” “It is time to go to bed!” she coached. Almost grudgingly Caleb tuned off his game. “Be sure to say your prayers!” she rallied. “I will mom, in fact I do early prayers.” Puzzled she ask, “Early prayers, when do you pray early?”, “Well, I pray before I pray. I pray early. You see I find it hard to keep my mind on what I am praying for, so I pray early. First I pray, ‘Jesus help keep my mind on my prayers’, then I pray for what I want.” Caleb responded in discovered confidence. Wouldn’t that be a good for all of us?

Our readings today are like that for this feast of the Baptism of the Lord. In a theological sense, the baptism of John was not in the same way as the sacrament. It was a baptism of repentance. The salvific nature of baptism, which launches us toward eternal life, came as a result of Jesus crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Then came Pentecost, where in the upper room the disciples gathered and received the Holy Spirit.

Unpack this for me Deacon! First, it is a typology that means to prefigure. Jesus accepted John’s baptism as a sign of what was to come when the promise of Baptism was fulfilled: Pentecost. The scriptures are full of such prefigures, such as: Noah’s ark, which protected the believers from the flood and the Ark of the Covenant, which not only carried the tablets of that Moses brought down the mountain, but was also a prefigure of Mary the Mother of God as the ark of the new covenant whose womb was to carry Jesus. Second, the trinity is revealed, where upon receiving baptism we are consecrated in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Third, the opening of the heavens signifies that the power, the effectiveness of the sacrament, comes from above and the advantage of eternal life is open to us. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

OK maybe it’s a little dramatic, but the journey of Christ is a very dramatic event. Unfortunately, it is possible to get caught up in only the dramatic parts of this scripture. John declaring that he is not the Christ. The massive crowd witnessing the announcement that Jesus is the Christ. The prophecies being fulfilled for which the Hebrews had waited for thousands of years. In all this we might miss some of the underlying events. This baptismal scene in the Jordan River, where the Israelites entered the Promised Land after the 40 years in the desert, is as much the ordination of Jesus to his public life as a prefiguring of baptism. Jesus being proclaimed as the Son of God. The patronage of the Father was so important to the culture of the Hebrew people of Jesus’ time. Luke identifies this paternal connection in that the Father in each family announces the total responsibility for any action of the son. That’s why in the prodigal son, the father was so publicly disgraced by the actions of his son. Jesus does not need to be baptized. He chooses this experience with John not only to reveal his divine and human nature to us, but more to reveal us to ourselves. This is where he says “and you will be divine”. “You are divine! You are divine! You are divine!” This is not about the way we appeal to each other as divine, or nice, or acceptable, but rather the character we are given at baptism

and how we appeal to God. Jesus reveals to us the supernatural character that is part of the inherited potential of our created nature that becomes divinely connected at baptism. Just like the acknowledgement of Jesus' divine connection in the river of John's ministry.

We are warned by Karol Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict, and Father Groeschel not to try to see these as historic events only. These are not just nice little stories about what happened 2000 years ago. First of all, the fact that there is not time in eternity is a human problem. At this moment we are just as easily standing in the Jordan River listening to the declaration that the Christ is with us, that God has entered our world to re-establish our divinity, our supernatural destination. Baptism is a big deal. It is the deal. It is our launch pad to eternal life. At baptism we are separated from the gravitational effect of original sin.

In the same sense, we are separated from the atmosphere of the world with its obsessions, temptations, and physical entrapments. We are given a guidance system and the fuel of sanctifying grace to keep us headed toward 'The Beatitude' as Aquinas would call heaven as the final frontier. This is not *star wars*, this is the real thing, this is the war between good and evil. Sadly many baptized barely get off the launch pad when they come crashing back to earth, leeward back by the attractiveness of earthly objects and the desire for possessions as progress. But this is finally a time of hope. The tide is turning. The grace of the Holy Spirit is showing its effects just like God did when he acknowledge Jesus as his son.

What are we called to do as a result of these readings? First, we are called to acknowledge Christ in our lives by cooperation with the grace, the strength of God in our daily lives. There are positive signs everywhere. There is a return to orthodoxy in the church. This is a turn to our divine teachings, the trinity, immaculate conceptions, catholic marriage, and the power of reconciliation.

This past weekend in Orlando, Florida for 4 days 4,000 students attended the Catholic College Student Conference called 'Focus'. These were not kids from Catholic colleges, these were kids from public universities where the profession of the universal faith is thriving. 4,000 young people professing their catholic faith, over 1,000 confessions in a single day, heard by over 100 priests in attendance, the future of our church coming out of the dark period of Christianity between 1968 and 1999.

We are called in these reading today to imitate Christ in heralding the good news. Catholic bashing is no longer is vogue. The problem is that many of us do it without realizing what we are doing. The good news is a focus on what is good in our lives, the wonderful things that God has given each one of us. If we don't feel that way we are not living our baptismal call. We are called to see the good in each other. We are called to acknowledge our membership in the mystical body of Christ. We are called in baptism to build each other up. Just like Caleb, we are called to really pray, really participate in the liturgy; take time to focus on the good news in our lives. Remember we become like things we read and the people we listen to. WOW, that is scary when you really think about what we read and what we listen to. Since the demise of the FCC's ban on foul language on the airwaves in the late 60's, what we are subjected to by just turning on the radio or the television? Think of what young children can access today by accident. We must pray to the Lord to help us pray like Caleb who prays so that he may pray.

He has baptized you with the Holy Spirit and fire to be heralds of the good news.