

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” BAPTISM OF THE LORD (B)
Isaiah 42: 1-4, 6-7 Psalm 29 Acts 10: 34-38 Mark 1: 7-11

Dear Preachers:

The readings say much about Jesus’s baptism and the identity of the Lord revealed in the baptism. And, by extension, they also speak to our own baptism, our incorporation into the community of Jesus’ followers. We might take any one of the readings and find a rich amount of material that will help us deepen our baptismal awareness today.

The Isaiah reading comes from the time of the Exile. The people are in desperation, their lives completely displaced, and they are in foreign surroundings. What happened to God’s promises to be with them, to be their God? Israel has to reflect on its own behavior; it had fallen short as God’s people in ethical and moral areas. After all, they were the “chosen” people and to be such a people, not only entailed the special relationship they had with God but called for a response. They, by their lives, were to be upright, to be a “light” to the nations, they were to live by the commandments God had placed before them. They had not and in exile there seemed to be nothing left. Their condition was most miserable. They had fallen far from their chosen state.

But here in today’s reading, one of the Servant Songs from Isaiah, God is renewing the pledge with them. God sees their desperate situation and has chosen one who is faithful to rescue them. Through this gesture God seems to be reconciling the people to God’s self. This servant will be a reminder of the covenant, and a reminder of God’s fidelity. Notice the healing of the broken suggested in the bruised reed imagery. The one God is sending shall be a gentle servant of God. This servant will also be a light; the light image is often used to refer to teaching. The teaching of this chosen one will be light to those lost in their ways and in other teachings.

Of course, the Servant figure is also applied to Israel. Israel will be the same kind of people, a servant of God, chosen to be a sign of God’s love to those who live in darkness. Our baptism makes us chosen ones as well and we are called to reflect in our lives this relationship with God and God’s concern for the world. As a new semester begins, the preacher might allude to our school teachers who bring light to the minds of the young and searching. You might also want to acknowledge teachers of faith in the community who communicate the light of faith to children and adults in religious education programs.

The reading from Acts follows the emphasis on Baptism. It is from Peter's last discourse in Acts and it marks the acceptance of the Gentiles into the community of Christians. God shows no partiality. The faithful among the Jewish people, manifested in their deeds, showed them to be a covenanted and observant people. Their good works were outward signs of their special place before God----their strict observance of the Law, circumcision, the dietary practices and feasts. They had the outward assurances of their special place with God. Now Peter is suggesting the Gentiles are accepted by God with no prior observances, and no prior selection by God. There truly is no partiality with God, no one is outside the favor of God now, everyone is welcomed to be baptized. The preacher might allude to the barriers that still seem to exist in our congregations: we judge each other on external norms of lifestyle, economics, race, country of origin, etc. We claim a parish to be "ours" because our grandparents built it, and we resent recent arrivals and their "foreign" ways. The barriers we have erected are contrary to the unity we have professed in our baptisms. A baptized community works to put aside such barriers, wherever they exist.

In the Gospel for today the people who felt bereft and outside the pale of organized religion, come out to be baptized by John. If they accept his message, they are expressing belief that God is about to come to help them. To be baptized would mean they have hope, and John is promising them that their confusion will be taken away by the gift of the Spirit. Jews had required baptism of Gentile converts as a sign they needed special cleansing. They had, as Gentiles, been cut off from God and the Promise. But John's baptism is for all and so he is repudiating any exclusiveness, any sense of favoritism by God. All must be baptized; all are in need and must be open to receive the new thing God is doing. No people have a claim on God; no people have special status and favor before God; there are no special "chosen people."

Since Jesus was sinless, baptism for him must mean more than the remission of sin. He is immersed in the waters of the Jordan, the waters the chosen people passed through to get to the Promise Land. So, Jesus continues Israel's call to be chosen, and the Spirit testifies to God's choice of him. He finds favor with God. He accepts the vocation of acting the way the chosen were supposed to act, by spreading the universal love of God for all. Our baptism then, includes us in this vocation as agents of God, it is a sacrament of vocation. The religion of Jesus is not a private affair, but as the baptized, we must take up Jesus' cause and invite all to share in the status of Jesus as God's "beloved child" on whom God's favor rests.

Mark makes it very clear that the emphasis is on Jesus. John the Baptist was an important part of God's plan, but he is clearly not the focus of this story. He is pointing to the One who is to come and who will be the focus of this Gospel from now on. Jesus, we are told, will bring with him the powerful presence of God's Spirit and this Spirit will be God's saving and abiding presence for those baptized in the name of Jesus.

What is God like? How can we describe God? Well, the passage says that Jesus has the presence of God's Spirit and will share this Spirit with us. Once we have received this Spirit we will know God, because we will look at Jesus with eyes opened by the Spirit and we will see God. We will learn, through Jesus, that God is a forgiving and compassionate, slow to anger and quick to forgive. Our baptism brings this eye-opening gift of the Spirit. We will look differently at all of life and now apply different standards of measurement to all we experience. Where once we saw lowly and forgotten ones, we will now see the honored guests in God's reign; where once we saw sin and guilt, we will now see possibilities for forgiveness and acceptance; where once we saw frustration and despair, we will now see avenues of hope and new possibilities; where once we saw sickness and death, we will now see healing and new life.

We do not have this vision and new perspective on our own, nor can we produce and sustain it by mere force of will and determination. But, what John promised has occurred, "one mightier" has followed and when washed in the living waters of his baptism brings a whole new Spirit, a whole new way to see ourselves, others and God. So many of us have not always heard affirming words spoken to us. We have instead heard words of belittlement, words of anger and words that have hurt us. But now through our Baptism and ongoing faith in Christ, we can hear another word spoken over us. What Jesus heard at his baptism, we now hear through our baptism into him, "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased." These healing words are repeated again and again throughout our lives, they accompany each of us in this believing community on our journey home.

What shall we pray for at this celebration today? We pray to experience anew the love God has for us in our baptismal unity with Christ. We pray that we will be forgiven the artificial barriers we have constructed that separate rather than join us to other peoples. We pray that we will live as the chosen ones of God, that our lives will be a light through which others can see the presence of a gracious God in their lives. We pray for all who teach faith to others, especially those in our catechetical and RCIA programs.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

THE PREACHING LIFE, by Barbara Brown Taylor. Boston: Cowley, 1993.

A personal reflection on the joys and struggles of the preaching life told by one of the better-known preachers in the U.S. today. Her preaching reveals the great care she takes forming words and painting pictures. She is an excellent preacher and this book shows the work and sources of inspiration that lead to such preaching. A very good read.

QUOTABLE:

Every sermon also begins and ends with God. Because the word of God is what a preacher wrestles with in the pulpit, and because it is a living word, every sermon is God's creation as well as the creation of the preacher and the congregation.

My hermeneutics:

1) I begin with a long sitting spell with an open Bible on my lap; I read and read and read the text. I am hunting for the God in it, God for me and for my congregation at this particular moment in time. I am waiting to be addressed by the text by my own name, to be called out by it so that I look back at my human situation and see it from a new perspective, one that is more like God's.

2) I compare translations and study words. I ask: what did this passage mean to the one who first wrote it down? I am not free to pluck it out and use it in my own design. It has its own integrity. I work on discerning its original meaning before imposing any other on it. A preacher's aim is not to dazzle but to nourish.

3. Once I have done all my homework and have a decent idea what the text means, I give it a rest. I tuck the text in the pocket of my heart and walk around with it inside of me. I turn the words and images loose on the events of my everyday life and see how they mix. It is time to daydream, whittle, whistle, pray.

4. Then I write.

----excerpts from, THE PREACHER'S LIFE.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (FrJude@JudeOP.org)

Our webpage Address: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,
Jude Siciliano, OP
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