

Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski
Baptism of the Lord – Year C
January 13, 2019

August 29, 1954.

That was the day that I, a 1-month old, was baptized. That was the day that I was sacramentally assimilated to Jesus, gaining a share in God's divine life.

If you are like most cradle Catholics, you were also baptized as an infant and I suspect that you don't know the day on which you were baptized. We celebrate our birthdays and wedding anniversaries, but rarely do we even know the day on which we received the gift of the Holy Spirit, cleansed from the stain of original sin, reborn as adopted children of the Father, and incorporated into and made sharers of the mission of the Church. And that's a shame because of the importance of our baptismal day to our salvation. (By the way, I didn't know my baptismal date until I applied for the diaconate!) But more about our baptism later.

"The end of the beginning and the beginning of the end" is how I think of the scene in today's Gospel, set in the Jordan River.

Beginning with the Gospel passage:

- Of the Annunciation,
- Continuing with the Visitation,

- The birth of the infant Jesus,
- The finding of the 12-year old Jesus in the temple and
- The adoration of the Magi,

for the last 6 weeks we have heard the infancy narratives in Luke's Gospel: The stories of Jesus' infancy and childhood, the **beginning** of his life. Last week we reached "the end of the beginning." Today's Gospel passage skips forward about 18-years, bypassing "the hidden years" of Jesus about which nothing is known. The Baptism of the Lord marks "the beginning of the end:" The inauguration of Jesus' public ministry that ends with His passion, death, resurrection and ascension that we will hear in Luke's Gospel over the remainder of this liturgical year.

Just prior to the scene in today's Gospel, John the Baptist had been administering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and an invitation to a new way of life to sinners, tax collectors and soldiers, Pharisees and Sadducees. Now, Jesus appears and is himself baptized, then "heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."" This heavenly declaration is the manifestation, or "Epiphany," which reveals Jesus to be the Messiah of Israel and Son of God. In this spectacular passage, Luke's Gospel gives us a glimpse of the identity and function of the Most Blessed Trinity —

we see the Father as the One who begets and sends the Son to redeem the human race; the Son as the obedient servant who accomplishes the will of the Father; and the Holy Spirit as the Sanctifier who empowers this mission of redemption. This scene is beautifully portrayed in the Cathedral's stained-glass window just above our baptismal font. Since I have been at the Cathedral, I have enjoyed looking at the stained-glass windows and contemplating the various episodes in the life of Jesus that they depict. When I have gazed upon that window of the Baptism of the Lord, I have often wondered "Why?" Why would Jesus, the Son of God, like us in all things but sin, need to be baptized. In other Gospel passages, even John the Baptist questions "why?"

A possible answer may be found in the book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, written by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, in which he suggests that Jesus' baptism is an expression of his fundamental submission to the will of the Father and his complete identification with sinners. By his submersion in the waters of the Jordan, Jesus is publicly seen as a man who is himself in need of repentance and forgiveness, although in actuality, he has no such need. Through his baptism, Jesus is already embracing the enormous weight of humanity's sinfulness, just as he will again in a definitive and final way on the cross. These mysterious events, which we heard in today's Gospel passage, foreshadow the saving acts of Christ's death and

resurrection. He empties himself, not clinging to his equality with God but becoming a "slave" for the sake of our salvation.

In Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, we see him anointed as the Christ by the Holy Spirit, we hear the Father proclaim his fundamental identity as the beloved Son, and we see Jesus fully embrace his mission as one of humility, a self-emptying love and sacrificial identification with everything in us that was lost, broken and dead from the time of the sin of Adam and Eve.

That brings us back to our own baptism, in which Jesus is the source of the Holy Spirit that descended upon us. As part of the Baptismal Rite, our parents and godparents dedicated us to God and accepted the task of transmitting the Catholic faith to us. Now, as adults, we are called to **continue to grow in that faith**. In today's Gospel, Christ makes a new beginning, "the beginning of the end." Throughout the rest of the liturgical year, as we journey through Luke's Gospel, we will be part of Christ's life here on earth. We will get to know Jesus better, see him grow and develop his ministry and, hopefully, grow closer to him.

Also, as part of our baptismal calling, we are challenged to put the lessons we learn from the teachings of Jesus into practice in our daily lives and to share the blessings we have received. Since June when Mary and I arrived, we have been gratified by the welcome we have received.

We have also been moved by the out-pouring of volunteerism that we witness in the Cathedral parish, which has a relatively small staff compared to similar parishes: Two notable examples of this volunteerism are:

- The volunteers who design and set-up our worship environment, such as these beautiful Christmas season decorations which enhance our liturgies, and
- The incredible number of volunteers, parishioners and non-parishioners alike, who make possible Morning Glory Ministries, this vital ministry that assists the most needy and vulnerable downtown.

However, Mary and I have noted that the Cathedral is not without its challenges: Although we've made progress this past year, we still have about \$250,000 in debt from the Cathedral renovation, plus we have a sizable, \$150,000, balance in current bills left unpaid. While new to the Cathedral, Mary and I are extremely optimistic about our future. We believe we have the membership and the donors to make significant progress on our debts and to expand our volunteer base, as long as everyone participates.

The Stewardship Council has selected this time to launch our annual pledge appeal. And while we do NOT yet have the pledge envelopes (they will soon be available), we invite you to prayerfully consider, over

the coming weeks, your response to your baptismal call to utilize your gifts for the benefit of God's kingdom here on earth. We hope that you will embrace the 20/20/20 challenge that we are renewing this year by:

- Devoting 20 minutes to prayer each day,
- Dedicating at least 20 hours of service this year to our various ministries, and
- Financially contributing \$20 per week to the Cathedral. Some can only give a lesser amount, while others can contribute more.

Your support will enable our Cathedral parish to become even more-vibrant in 2019.

For you visitors: We are thankful for your presence and we are honored that you choose to worship with us. During our travels, when Mary and I worship at other parishes, we put \$20 in the collection basket, knowing the financial struggles that most parishes face. Whatever you visitors can give to us, know that we receive your gift with gratitude and your contribution will make a difference through the working of our various ministries.

With the support of parishioners and visitors alike, we, the Cathedral parish, will respond to our baptismal call with the knowledge, in the words of John F. Kennedy, of "knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own."

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Things to include:

- As Pope Francis explained in his homily on this day a year ago when he performed the annual tradition, instituted by St. Pope John Paul II, of celebrating Mass and baptizing 34 children in the Sistine Chapel: "We need the Holy Spirit to transmit the faith; we cannot do it alone. Transmitting the faith is a grace that comes from the Holy Spirit." The family is the first transmitter of the faith: Mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, as the first catechists, with the help of the Holy Spirit and using the "language" of love, family love, build upon the gifts of the Holy Spirit received in baptism and nurture the Holy Spirit who lives and grows in our hearts.