

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord



Baptism of Christ | Pietro Perugino, 1482 | Sistine Chapel, Vatican City | PD-US

Before we delve into the scripture readings for the day, a brief note on the history of the feast day.

Originally the baptism of Jesus was celebrated on Epiphany. At that time, the Feast of Epiphany commemorated the coming of the Magi, the baptism of Christ, and the wedding at Cana. The common theme being the “theophany” of the Lord to the nations and the people of Israel.

Over time the emphasis of the visit of the magi during Epiphany so minimized the Baptism of Jesus and the wedding at Cana, accommodations were made to the (western) lectionary of Sundays and Feast Days. In the West the celebration of the baptism of the Lord came to be commemorated as a distinct feast from Epiphany. In the Eastern Catholic tradition Epiphany is celebrated on January 6th regardless of the day of the week on which it falls. In the Western Catholic tradition Epiphany is celebrated on the first Sunday following January 1st.

In 1955, the Feast of the Baptism (in the West) was established as the Sunday after Epiphany with one caveat. If Epiphany is celebrated on Sunday, Jan. 7 or 8, the Baptism of the Lord is the following Monday - and part of the Christmas season - and "Ordinary Time" begins the following day.

The Gospel Reading and the Passage

The Gospel reading is not a continuous pericope (a selection from a larger narrative) from Luke, as shown immediately below 4 verses are removed from the passage so that the text that is proclaimed focuses entirely on the revelation of the Messiah and his Baptism by John.

¹⁵ Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, “I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire.

[¹⁷ His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” ¹⁸ Exhorting them in many other ways, he preached

good news to the people.¹⁹ Now Herod the tetrarch, who had been censured by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil deeds Herod had committed,²⁰ added still another to these by (also) putting John in prison.]

²¹ *After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened²² 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."* (Luke 15-22, with vv.17-20 not part of the proclaimed gospel)

The apocalyptic tone of the 4 verses (17-20) makes sense in the large pericope that starts at Luke 3:1. Let us see how that plays out in the flow of Luke's narrative.

The Flow of Luke's Story

As regards the flow of Luke's gospel, our reading follows on immediately after the events recounted in the readings for the [Feast of the Holy Family](#). Luke tells the story of Jesus, a child of 12, accompanying Mary and Joseph to Passover in Jerusalem. Long story short, Jesus stays behind when his parents and the pilgrims from Nazareth start the journey home. Upon realizing Jesus was not with the returning pilgrims, Mary and Joseph return to Jerusalem, search for their child, and find him in the Temple: "*sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers.*" (Luke 3:46-47) Upon being found, Jesus offers: "*Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?*" (v.49) The family returns to Nazareth where "*Jesus advanced [in] wisdom and age and favor before God and man.*" (v.52) We "turn the page" and it is now some 18 years later and we come upon John, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, in the wilderness preaching a baptism for the forgiveness of sin (Luke 3:2-6).

Luke began the section on the Nativity and Infancy stories by placing them in the flow on history. Here at the start of Jesus' public ministry and messianic mission, Luke tells is the historical context:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas (Luke 3:1-2)

With the context set we come to John in the wilderness. Luke casts the call of John the Baptist in the form of an Old Testament prophetic call and pointedly connects John's ministry to the prophecy of Isaiah:

"A voice proclaims: In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God! Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and hill made low; The rugged land shall be a plain, the rough country, a broad valley. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." (Isaiah 40:3-5)

Compare that text with Luke's account:

⁴ *as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'* ⁵ *Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth,* ⁶ *and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."* (Luke 3:4-6)

[...you can see how these verses might be natural lead-in to the apocalyptic tone of the 4 verses extracted from the proclaimed gospel, especially verses such as v.9: *Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*]

Where Matthew uses Isaiah's text in his quest to show Jesus fulfills many OT prophet promises, in making that same connection, Luke will add this to his theme of the universality of salvation, which he has announced earlier in the words that Simeon proclaimed about the infant Jesus at the Dedication ceremony in the Jerusalem Temple ([Luke 2:30-32](#)).

And this brings us to the gospel reading for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

Jesus' Baptism

In our celebration of the Baptism of the Lord, we draw an excerpt from the Gospel of Luke (3:15-16, 21-22) which describes, in quite succinct terms, the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist.

¹⁵ Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah.

In describing the expectation of the people, Luke is characterizing the time of John's preaching in the same way as he had earlier described the situation of other devout Israelites in the infancy narrative. In [Luke 3:7-14](#) Luke presents the preaching of John the Baptist who urges the crowds to reform in view of the coming wrath, and who offers the crowds solutions to their cries, "What should we do?" His responses always center on reforming their social conduct, not as an end to itself, but as evidence of their repentance. It all builds to their wondering if John might indeed be the Messiah. Yet John's response steers them in a different direction.

¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire....."

[verse part of the text, but not the Sunday gospel] "His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but 'the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' Exhorting them in many other ways, he preached good news to the people." (v.17-18)

With little other introduction and no indication that Jesus had been among the crowd or that John had seen him, we are simply told:

²¹ After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened ²² 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."

There are two unique aspects to these few verses. You might have noted that Luke has no description of Jesus coming out of the water. In an element of the baptismal account found only in Luke we find Jesus in prayer. Luke will regularly presents Jesus at prayer at important points in his ministry: here at his baptism; at the choice of the Twelve (6:12); before Peter's confession (9:18); at the transfiguration (9:28); when he teaches his disciples to pray (11:1); at the Last Supper (22:32); on the Mount of Olives (22:41); on the cross (23:46). Notably, the description here is similar to the transfiguration (9:28) in the revelatory nature/result of prayer.

The "heaven was opened." Does Luke intend to imply anything more than as a means for the "coming down of the Spirit" and so that the "voice from heaven" might be clearly heard.

In one way, heaven was opened earlier in the Nativity scenes when the "multitude of the heavenly hosts" appear and praise God and then return to heaven (2:13, 15).

The next time "heaven" is used following our current text is in Chapter 4, which is part of Jesus' sermon in the Nazareth synagogue. Then, Jesus makes reference to the time of Elijah "when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land."

If the “shutting up of heaven” resulted in famine and all that goes along with that: hunger, sickness, death; could not the “opening of heaven” symbolize the coming of plenty, health, and life? The same word for “opening” (*anoigo*) is used in some manuscripts of the Nazareth synagogue scene. Jesus opens the scroll, reading from the prophet Isaiah: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me.*” (Luke 4:18)

Each scene connects an “opening” (heaven, Word of God) resulting in the presence of the Spirit (descended, anointed) - each scene allowing God to make a declaration about Jesus.

The Meaning of Jesus’ Baptism

John contrasts his baptism with that of Jesus. The point is not that one baptism is with water, the other in the Holy Spirit and fire (the early church also baptized in water from the beginning), but that John’s baptism is *only* in water, that is, a ritual sign expressing outwardly what the person must express inwardly.

The baptism of Jesus will be definitive: it will be an act of God bringing salvation (Holy Spirit) and judgment (fire). The image of fire is expanded by reference to the process of separating wheat from chaff. A “winnowing fan” or shovel tosses the mixture into the air; the heavier kernels of wheat fall to the floor, while the chaff blows away for later burning (Isa 21:10).

Culpepper (“Luke”, New Interpreter's Bible, 85-6) offers the following:

“What is the relationship between Spirit and fire in this saying? The following interpretations have been advanced: (1) fire describes the inflaming purifying work of the Spirit; (2) the repentant will receive the Spirit, while the unrepentant will experience the judgment of fire; (3) since the Greek term for “Spirit” can also mean “wind,” the meaning is that Jesus' baptism will bring the judgment in a mighty wind and fire; (4) as might be implicit in the first option, “Spirit” or “wind” and “fire” reflect the Christian interpretation of the Pentecost experience; or (5) John saw in Spirit and fire the means of eschatological purification: the refiner's fire for the repentant and destruction for the unrepentant. The last combines elements of (2) and (3) and fits both the historical context of John's preaching and the literary context in which the saying about winnowing follows. Luke, of course, may have seen the fulfillment of this saying at Pentecost in ways John could not have imagined.”

In v.18 we are told that John preached “good news.” This is part of the Lucan transition to move from the ministry of John to that of Jesus. We can assume John preached about the soon-to-come arrival of the Messiah as part of that “good news.” Craddock (Luke, Interpretation Commentaries, 49) offers this wonderful summary: “When repentance and forgiveness are available, judgment is good news (v. 18). The primary aim is to save the wheat, not to burn the chaff.” John offers hope and new life for the tax collectors, the soldiers, and all sinners. We all can be gathered by Jesus into his kingdom.

“the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove”

Only Luke includes the phrase “in bodily form”. Jensen (Preaching Luke's Gospel) makes the point that “Bodily descent has the character of permanence. The Spirit not only descended upon Jesus; the Spirit of God came in bodily form and it will remain upon Jesus.” He makes a contrast between Jesus and Israel's Judges in the time before the Kings. The Spirit of God descended on them but only descended temporarily.

The descent of the Spirit on Jesus can not be understood separately from Luke 4:18-19 where Jesus quotes Isaiah 61:1-2

“The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives and

release to the prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the LORD and a day of vindication by our God, to comfort all who mourn”

The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus was an anointing (and empowering) for his ministry on earth. At the same time, prior to this event at Nazareth, we are told: “*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil*” (4:1-2a). At the end of the temptation, we are told, “*Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee*” (4:14a). Did Jesus’ “power” for his ministry come just from the descent of the Holy Spirit or from his successful battle with the devil in the wilderness? The answer is probably “both”. If we want to experience the power of the Spirit, it may mean that we have to do more than pray. We may have to enter into the battle with Satan -- evil forces wherever they may be in our communities or within us.

Craddock (Luke, *Interpretation Commentaries*, p.52) writes: “The coming of the Holy Spirit does not make Jesus the Son of God; Luke has told us who Jesus is from the time of the annunciation. The Holy Spirit comes to empower Jesus for his ministry. He will soon be led by the Spirit into the desert (4:1), and then he will return ‘in the power of the spirit into Galilee’ (4:14).” Both the temptation story and the Isaiah quote indicate that Jesus’ Spirit-led ministry is to battle and defeat evil in whatever form it appears. And, that Spirit-led ministry continues after the ascension through “all flesh” upon whom God has now poured the Spirit.

“And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’”

The voice in Luke, as in Mark, speaks directly to Jesus. We overhear the words. In Matthew’s account of the baptism and all three accounts of the transfiguration, the voice speaks to those around Jesus: “*This is my son....*”

What does it mean to be the “Son of God?” Luke provides answers to this in the larger context. The baptism in Luke is followed by a genealogy which ends with “son of God.” This is followed by the temptation story where the devil tries to help Jesus get a “better” understanding. Twice he states: “If you are the Son of God” (4:3, 9).

Next Jesus reads in Nazareth from Isaiah: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..*” (quoted above) With these verses, we come to understand more clearly the meaning of the descending Spirit at Jesus’ baptism. Being the Son of God means facing temptation and being a servant to all in need. It is not a life of glory, but a life that will lead to the cross. Tannehill (Luke, p.85) suggests that the devil tries to tempt Jesus “with another understanding of his role as Son of God, for it could be understood as privilege rather than calling. Through struggle, Jesus must arrive at the right understanding of his position as Son of God”.

A proper understanding of Jesus’ role is indicated by Luke’s other use of the term “beloved” (*agapetos*). At one level its meaning is simply that Jesus is deeply loved by his heavenly Father. It is interesting that this term is next used again in Luke 20:13, the parable of the vineyard. In that parable, the owner of a vineyard decides to send his beloved (*agapetos*) son to the tenants of the vineyard after they had mistreated the slaves he had sent to them. He says to himself, “*I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.*” They don’t. They kill the beloved son, which is what will happen to Jesus. Is it perhaps that Luke is hinting at another role of what it means to the Son of God?

Well-Pleased

I find it interesting that God is already “well pleased” (*eudokeo*) with Jesus. Jesus hasn’t done anything yet within the narrative, except the incident in the temple when he was twelve (2:41-51). In fact, it is in the verse following God’s indication of pleasure in Jesus, that we are told that Jesus begins his work. God’s pleasure in him began before Jesus started his public ministry.

Is God “well pleased” with us because we do things that please God; or does God's positive attitude towards us because of who we are, before we have done anything pleasing or non-pleasing, motivate us to seek to do what is pleasing to God -- to live up to what God has already declared us to be?

Tannehill (*Luke*, p.85): “God is affirming a special relationship with Jesus and uses words that express the closest kind of familial and emotional bond. Jesus is “my Son,” he is “the Beloved,” and he is one with whom God is “well pleased” (an indication of God's special favor). With these words, God confirms a special relationship with Jesus and expresses confidence in him. But with the relationship goes responsibility, for the relationship implies obedience and the gift of the Spirit implies a mission. God's expressed confidence in Jesus binds God's cause to Jesus, who is now responsible for it. Jesus must respond to God's trust by doing God's will.”

I don't think that Luke told us about Jesus' baptism just to inform us about what happened to Jesus. He relates this story also to indicate something about our baptisms, our need to be in prayer, our anointing with the Spirit, and our subsequent battles with evil and ministry in the world. We have a “beloved” and “well-pleasing” relationship with God. With that comes the responsibility to live out of that relationship – to fulfill the mission God sends before us – to live up to the confidence God has placed on us. Jesus' baptism prefigures Pentecost. The era of Jesus' ministry prefigures the era of the Church's ministry, our ministry, in the world.

The Theology of History

It is interesting to note that Luke relates no encounter between Jesus and John. In fact, before we are told about Jesus' baptism, we are informed that John has been put in prison (3:20)! A traditional way of understanding this order of events is that Luke (the rhetorical historian) divides history into three separate and distinct eras. The first is the time of the prophets, which includes John the Baptist. That era ends with the imprisonment of John. John will no longer be in the picture. After that, the time of Jesus begins with a statement in our text about: (1) the opening of heaven, (2) the coming down of the Holy Spirit in a visible form (dove); and (3) heavenly speech. This era of Jesus ends with his ascension -- related only in Luke & Acts. Jesus will no longer be in the picture. After that, the time of the Holy Spirit (or the Church) begins with a statement in Acts 2:1-4 about (1) something coming “from heaven,” (2) the coming down of the Holy Spirit in a visible form (tongues of fire), and (3) heavenly speech.

For Luke, the movement from an old era into a new one required a break from the old – John is put in prison – Jesus ascends into heaven. Yet, at the same time, there are common elements in all three periods, such as the fulfillment of promises/prophecies and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The fact that we are living in the third era sometimes needs to be emphasized. There are those whose faith is so centered on the historical Jesus, that they can't live their lives in the new period under the power of the Holy Spirit. If all we do is talk about the historical Jesus, e.g., arguing about the virgin birth, the miracles, the physical resurrection – we may be making faith nothing more than believing historical events really happened, i.e., a history lesson. While such teachings are certainly part of our Christian confession of faith, it is clear that for the early believers described in the Book of Acts, faith was relying on the power of the Holy Spirit for life today. They recognized that Jesus had left this earth. In order for the ministry of Jesus to continue, it would have to be done by all the believers who had been filled with the power of the Holy Spirit – not by Jesus nor by particular Spirit-filled people, i.e., the prophets - but all believers.

Why was Jesus baptized by John?

This is a question that has been the subject of much theological reflection. In Luke's Gospel (Luke 3:21-22) and the other Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist is presented as a pivotal

moment at the start of His public ministry. There are several key reasons often proposed for why Jesus underwent John's baptism, despite His sinlessness and lack of need for repentance:

Identification with Humanity: Jesus' baptism demonstrates His solidarity with humanity. By undergoing baptism, He identifies with the sinful people He came to save. This act foreshadows His ultimate identification with humanity's sin on the cross (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Validation of John's Ministry: by being baptized by John, Jesus affirms and validates John's role as the forerunner of the Messiah. John's ministry was to prepare the way for Jesus, and Jesus' baptism publicly acknowledges this.

Fulfillment of Righteousness: In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells John that His baptism is necessary "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). This suggests that Jesus is committed to fulfilling God's will in every respect, including participating in the rites that symbolize repentance and dedication to God.

Revealing His Identity: The baptism is a moment of divine revelation. After Jesus is baptized, the Holy Spirit descends on Him in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven declares, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22). This event publicly reveals Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, marking the beginning of His ministry.

Foreshadowing His Death and Resurrection: Baptism, symbolizing death to sin and rising to new life, foreshadows Jesus' own death and resurrection. By being baptized, Jesus symbolically enters into the human condition and anticipates His redemptive work.

Empowerment for Ministry: The descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus at His baptism signifies His anointing and empowerment for the mission ahead. This aligns with the prophecy of the Spirit-filled Messiah (Isaiah 61:1-2).

Jesus' baptism wasn't about repentance for His own sins but was an act of humility, solidarity, and obedience to the Father's will. It inaugurated His public ministry and affirmed His identity and mission. Through this event, Jesus provides a model of submission to God's plan, even when it may seem unnecessary from a human perspective.

Some Additional Notes

21-22 After all the people...I am well pleased: These two verses are structured with primary and subordinate phrases. The primary phrases, by themselves, would form a sentence, literally translated, as follows: "It happened that the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit came down and a voice came out of heaven." The lines about Jesus' baptism and his praying are subordinate clauses (genitive absolutes in Greek). They are not the main point of the sentence. The aorist tense probably indicates that the baptism had happened sometime prior to the praying. The present tense indicates that Jesus was still praying when the main actions occurred: the opening, the coming down, and the heavenly speech.

you are my beloved Son: As does Mark, Luke tells us of a direct address to Jesus – which given is was during Jesus' prayer, we have the possibility that the voice was for Jesus alone and part of the prayer experience. The word "beloved" (*agapētos*) bears the nuance of "only son" as the LXX used it to translate the Hebrew *yahid* which means "only son."

son: This episode in Luke focuses on the heavenly message identifying Jesus as Son and, through the allusion to Isaiah 42:1, as Servant of Yahweh. The relationship of Jesus to the Father has already been announced in the infancy narrative (Luke 1:32,35; 2:49); it occurs here at the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry and will reappear in Luke 9:35 before another major section of Luke's gospel, the travel narrative

(Luke 9:51–19:27). Elsewhere in Luke’s writings (Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38), this incident will be interpreted as a type of anointing of Jesus.

well pleased: eudekeo. God is affirming a special relationship with Jesus and uses words that express the closest kind of familial and emotional bond. Jesus is “my Son,” he is “the Beloved,” and he is one with whom God is “well pleased” (an indication of God's special favor). With these words, God confirms a special relationship with Jesus and expresses confidence in him. But with the relationship goes responsibility, for the relationship implies obedience and the gift of the Spirit implies a mission. God's expressed confidence in Jesus binds God's cause to Jesus, who is now responsible for it. Jesus must respond to God's trust by doing God's will.