

# *Gratitude Foundation*

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*“Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?  
Has only this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?”*

(Lk. 17:15-17)

## The Baptism of the Lord—Year A

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*“In all things give thanks, it is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”*

(1 Thess: 5:18)

# The Baptism of the Lord

## Reading I

### Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

Thus says the LORD:

Here is my servant whom I uphold,  
my chosen one with whom I am pleased,  
upon whom I have put my spirit;  
he shall bring forth justice to the nations,  
not crying out, not shouting,  
not making his voice heard in the street.  
a bruised reed he shall not break,  
and a smoldering wick he shall not quench,  
until he establishes justice on the earth;  
the coastlands will wait for his teaching.

I, the LORD, have called you for the victory of justice,  
I have grasped you by the hand;  
I formed you, and set you  
as a covenant of the people,  
a light for the nations,  
to open the eyes of the blind,  
to bring out prisoners from confinement,  
and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.

## Responsorial Psalm

### Psalm 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10

**R. (11b) The Lord will bless his people with peace.**

Give to the LORD, you sons of God,  
give to the LORD glory and praise,  
Give to the LORD the glory due his name;  
adore the LORD in holy attire.

**R. The Lord will bless his people with peace.**

The voice of the LORD is over the waters,  
the LORD, over vast waters.

The voice of the LORD is mighty;  
the voice of the LORD is majestic.

**R. The Lord will bless his people with peace.**

The God of glory thunders,  
and in his temple all say, "Glory!"  
The LORD is enthroned above the flood;  
the LORD is enthroned as king forever.  
**R. The Lord will bless his people with peace.**

## **Reading II**

### **Acts 10:34-38**

Peter proceeded to speak to those gathered  
in the house of Cornelius, saying:  
"In truth, I see that God shows no partiality.  
Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly  
is acceptable to him.  
You know the word that he sent to the Israelites  
as he proclaimed peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all,  
what has happened all over Judea,  
beginning in Galilee after the baptism  
that John preached,  
how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth  
with the Holy Spirit and power.  
He went about doing good  
and healing all those oppressed by the devil,  
for God was with him."

## **Alleluia**

### **Cf. Mark 9:7**

**R. Alleluia, alleluia.**  
The heavens were opened and the voice of the Father thundered:  
This is my beloved Son, listen to him.  
**R. Alleluia, alleluia.**

## **Gospel**

### **Matthew 3:13-17**

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him.

John tried to prevent him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?"

Jesus said to him in reply, "Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

Then he allowed him.

After Jesus was baptized, he came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened for him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him.

And a voice came from the heavens, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

## Exegesis

### Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

Chapter 40 of the *Book of the Prophet Isaiah* begins a section of the book that is referred to by scripture scholars as *Second Isaiah* or *Deutero-Isaiah*. The scenery has shifted from the first 39 chapters which chronicle a time before the Exile. With the beginning of *Second Isaiah*, the Israelite People are now in exile. The diaspora, the exile in Babylon has begun. Jerusalem is destroyed and the great temple is a pile of rubble. The leaders of the people are in captivity in Babylon and many of the people are left to scatter, many quite literally in the desert.

The homilist should be aware of this context. This is the beginning of the second great salvation paradigm. Seeking answers for their plight they look to their own sinfulness and how they had strayed from God. Now they are turning towards God and yearning for His saving hand.

Written at the beginning of the Exile, *Deutero-Isaiah* seeks to bring the message of hope to the people. It is titled, *The Book of Consolation*, with our section sub-titled, *The Lord's Glory in Israel's Liberation*. When the author refers to Jerusalem, or Judah, he is referring not to a place but to a people. They are people in need of a Savior. Our pericope, the beginning of Chapter 42, is titled *The Servant of the Lord*.

The stage was set in Isaiah 40 and 41, the people are recently exiled and are looking for a Savior to set them free from bondage. This expected Savior is referred to as, *the Servant of the Lord*. Looking back, we see the fulfillment of this prophecy in Jesus.

For some reason the Lectionary skips verse 5 which is as follows: "Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spreads out the earth with crops, who gives breath to its people and spirit to those who walk on it."

The Creator God now seeks to save His people through His servant, upon whom He will also put His Spirit, e.g. the Holy Spirit that fell upon Jesus at His baptism, the Spirit that led and guided His life, the Spirit that He surrendered back to the Father from the Cross, the Spirit that raised Him from the dead, and the Spirit that He breathed upon the apostles in the Upper Room.

*I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nations.* Jesus becomes the New Covenant of God's love. He becomes the Light of the World. The descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, symbolizes God's love pouring into the world in and through Jesus, His beloved Son and Servant. The Servant image will make way for the Suffering Servant Songs of the Prophet Isaiah.

## Exegesis (Continued)

### Psalm 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10

Psalm 29 consists of eleven verses. It is titled *The Lord of Majesty Acclaimed as King of the World* in the NAB and *Ascribe to the Lord Glory* in the ESV.

Some scholars suggest that the song was originally a hymn to the Canaanite god Baal.<sup>1</sup> It is certainly a hymn celebrating the power of God. Seven times in this short psalm the Hebrew expression *quol Yahweh – voice of Yahweh – voice of the Lord* appears. The *voice of the Lord* can be heard in the mighty thunder. *Revelation* recalls the *seven thunders*: "When he (the angel) cried out, the seven thunders raised their voices, too." (Rev 10: 3).

*Give to the LORD, you sons of God, give to the LORD glory and praise, give to the LORD the glory due his name; adore the LORD in holy attire.* The Hebrew word that is translated in this verse and throughout this psalm as *LORD* is *Yahweh*. Note that in most bible translations when *LORD* appears with all four letters capitalized, the underlying Hebrew word is *Yahweh*. The Hebrew word that is translated as *give* is *yudhebid*. *Yudhebid* is sometimes

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1. Brown, Fitzmyer, Murphy; The New Jerome Biblical Commentary; P.H.; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.; page 531.

## Exegesis (Continued)

### Psalm 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10

translated as *ascribe* (ESV). It can also be translated *grant, come, come on, and provide*. *You sons of God* is translated in the ESV as *O heavenly beings*. The Book of Revelation recognizes *heavenly beings*, or *angels* as a heavenly entourage surrounding God. “All the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They prostrated themselves before the throne, worshiped God and exclaimed: ‘Amen. Blessing and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving, honor, peace and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen.’” (Rev 7: 11-12). Some scholars suggest that *heavenly beings* in this psalm reference the gods of the pagan pantheons who must pay homage to Yahweh, the one true God.<sup>2</sup> These verses are also found almost verbatim in *1 Chronicles*. “Give to the LORD, you families of nations, give to the LORD the glory due His name! Bring gifts and enter His presence; worship the LORD in holy attire.” (1 Chr 16: 28-29). The setting of this passage from *1 Chronicles* follows placing of the Ark of the Covenant in the tent by David. King David reigned from 1010 – 970 B.C. Most scholars date the promulgation of *1 Chronicles* much later, perhaps as late as 400 B.C. This is pure speculation on my part, but could it be that the Israelites plagiarized this hymn, once praising Baal, after the defeat of Baal and his prophets by Yahweh on Mount Carmel as chronicled in 1 Kings 18? This event took place in 867 B.C. Psalm 95: 7-8 repeats these verses as follows: “Give to the LORD, you families of nations, give to the LORD glory and might; give to the LORD the glory due His name.” (Ps 95: 7-8). Perhaps 1 Chronicles and Psalm 95 are more aligned with the original hymn to Baal and Psalm 29 changes *you families of nations* to *heavenly beings* in victory celebration over Baal and his prophets. All pagan gods (*heavenly beings*) must also pay homage to the LORD, the one true God.

*The voice of the LORD is over the waters, the LORD, over vast waters. The voice of the LORD is mighty; the voice of the LORD is majestic.* The Book of Job echoes this verse revealing the Lord’s mighty power. “Again, His voice roars; the majestic sound of His thunder. He does great things beyond our knowing; wonders past our searching out.” (Job 37: 4-5).

*The God of glory thunders, and in his temple, all say, “Glory!” The LORD is enthroned above the flood; the LORD is enthroned as king forever.* The Hebrew word that is translated as *Glory* in this verse is *Kabod*. *Kabod* suggests the response of *honor* and *glory* to the manifestation of power or divine presence. Here, God's triumph over chaos reveals His power. It is reflective of the power of God hovering over the waters of chaos in the creation story, a chaos that the power of God (the mighty wind) will transform into the beauty of creation. Stormy waters were frequently used to represent chaos, and any deity who could master this chaos was celebrated as the chief god. This psalm portrays the mere voice of God, the *quol* of *Yahweh*, as having power over the forces of nature. With this mighty power the Lord is enthroned forever as king of the universe.

*The Lord will bless his people with peace.* The Hebrew word that is translated in this verse as *peace* is *shalom*. *Shalom* a state of being that can only come from God. *Shalom* connotes a sense of *wellness, soundness, completeness, safeness, or satisfaction* that is beyond the chaos of this world. The Lord and heavenly beings hover over the stormy waters in this state of wellbeing. The Lord wants to give *His people* this gift of *shalom*.

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2. (cf. M. Dahood, *Psalms I* [AB, 1965], pp. 175f; A. Weiser, *Psalms* [Eng. tr., OTL, 1962], p. 262).

## Exegesis (Continued)

### Acts 10:34-38

The caption at the beginning of Acts Chapter 10 reads, *The Inauguration of the Gentile Mission*. Our pericope is titled *Peter's Speech* in the NAB and *Gentiles Hear the Good News* in the ESV. Chapter 10 begins with the vision of Cornelius and then is followed by the vision of Peter. The result of these two separate visions is that Peter comes to the house of Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile.

The expression, *God-fearing Gentile*, speaks of a reality that was common following the Exile and into NT times. During the diaspora and in the decades that followed pockets of Judaism sprang up throughout Mediterranean environs. With those Jewish communities synagogues were built. It was common for Gentiles who were seeking God to regularly attend synagogue services. They were welcomed and referred to as *God-fearing Gentiles*.

In Chapter 9 of Acts, Saul traveled to Jerusalem and met with the apostles, presumably Peter was there. So, Peter would have learned of Paul's calling by the Lord, to be a missionary to the Gentiles.

Now Peter, in a very personal way, is being called by the Lord to welcome the Gentile world into the Church. He boldly proclaims that Christ is "Lord of all." (vs 36). "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to Him." (vss. 34-35). Paul in a similar way proclaims this truth: "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon Him. For 'everyone who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.'" (Rom 10: 12-13).

Cornelius and his household were baptized. "While Peter was still speaking these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word." (Acts 10:44). "Then Peter responded, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit even as we have?' He ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." (Acts 10:46-48). Peter baptized the first of many Gentiles.

"*You know the word that he sent to the Israelites as he proclaimed peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all, what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power.*" The proclamation of the Good News of peace fulfills the promise of God through the Prophet Isaiah. "Therefore, on that day My people shall know My renown, that it is I who have foretold it. Here I AM! How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of Him who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation, and saying to Zion, 'Your God is King!'" (Is 52: 6-7). The Greek word that is translated as anointed in this verse is *chrío*, which is the root word for *Christos, the Anointed One*. The anointing of the Holy Spirit, of course, occurs at His baptism when the heavens are opened up and the Holy Spirit is seen descending upon Him. "On whomever you see the Spirit come down upon and remain; He is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit." (Jn 1: 33). The Greek word that is translated as *power* in this verse is *dynamis*. *Dynamis* is often used to describe the power of God and the power of God's word. *Dynamis* means *power, might, and strength*. *Dynamis* was often used to describe the *mighty deeds* of God, sometimes used to describe a *miracle*.

"*He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.*" Jesus begins His public ministry after His baptism which Matthew describes as follows: "His fame spread to all of Syria, and they brought to Him all who were sick with various diseases and racked with pain, those who were possessed, lunatics, and paralytics, and He cured them." (Mt 4: 24). Jesus confirmed that the Father remained with Him. "The One who sent Me is with Me. He has not left Me alone." (Jn 8: 29).

## Exegesis (Continued)

### Matthew 3:13-17

Matthew details the event of Jesus' baptism very similar to the other synoptic Gospels, Mark and Luke. Matthew, however, captures the dialogue between John the Baptist and Jesus that explains why Jesus, who is without sin and therefore in no need of repentance, would allow Himself to be baptized by John. Both Mark and Luke report the voice of God as being addressed specifically to Jesus, i.e. "You are my beloved Son." Matthew reports the voice of God as saying, "This is My beloved Son."

The Jordan River has been a symbol of the deliverance of God, the saving hand of God, in the OT. Similar to the Red Sea it plays an important role in the journey to the Promised Land. "Thus, the people crossed over (the Jordan) opposite Jericho. While Israel crossed over on dry ground, the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD remained motionless on the dry ground in the bed of the Jordan until the whole nation had completed the passage." (Josh 3: 16-17). Naaman the Syrian was cleansed of leprosy in the Jordan River. "So Naaman went down and plunged into the Jordan seven times at the word of the man of God. His flesh became again like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean." (2 Kgs 5: 14). The Hebrew word that is translated in this verse as *plunged* is *tabal*, which means to *dip, plunge* or *immerse*. In the LXX the word is translated as *ebaptisato*.

John was baptizing for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Ritual washing was an important part of Jewish tradition. "Though you pray the more, I (Yahweh) will not listen. Your hands are full of blood! Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds from before My eyes; cease doing evil; learn to do good." (Is 1: 15-16). John the Baptist was clear that he was baptizing for the cleansing of sins. "I am baptizing you with water, for repentance." (Mt 3: 11). Jesus, of course, had no need of baptism. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin." (Heb 4: 15).

*Jesus said to him in reply, "Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."* The Greek word that is translated in this verse as *fulfill* is *pleroo*. *Pleroo* means to *fulfill, complete, finish, or accomplish*. This is a common theme of Matthew, i.e., that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation. The Greek word that is translated here as *righteousness* is *dikaiosyne*. *Dikaiosyne* can be translated as *righteousness* or *justice*. Interestingly, it can also be translated as *fulfillment of the Law*. In the OT *justice* was achieved in strict observance of the Law. "Therefore, the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes in fear of the LORD, our God, that we may always have a prosperous and happy life as we have today; and our *justice* before the LORD, our God, is to consist in carefully observing all these commandments He has enjoined on us." (Deut 6: 24-25). *Dikaiosyne* is used seven times by Matthew, and it appears ninety-two times in the NT. St. Paul articulates the *dikaiosyne* of God as follows: "But now the righteousness (*dikaiosyne*) of God has been manifested apart from the Law, though testified to by the Law and the Prophets, the righteousness (*dikaiosyne*) of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." (Rom 3: 21).

By entering into the water of the Jordan River, Jesus enters into solidarity with us. Baptism is symbolic of dying and rising, of death and life, dying to the old and rising to new life. St. Anselm once said, "What is not assumed is not redeemed." Jesus fully enters into our human condition. He will share our life and share our death that we may one day share His life. In this God's plan of salvation is fulfilled, in Christ our Lord.

## Exegesis (Continued)

### Matthew 3:13-17

*After Jesus was baptized, he came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened for him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."* The Greek word that is translated as *behold* in this verse is *idou*. *Idou* can also be translated as *lo, look, see, listen, or pay attention*. This exhortation precedes the appearance of angels throughout the OT and the Gospels. God wants attention given to His messenger. The Hebrew equivalent to the Greek *idou* is *hinneh*. "Behold (*hinneh*), I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way for Me." (Mal 3: 1). The expression *the heavens were opened* is common in Sacred Scripture. It signifies the opening of communication between God and humanity, e.g., "While I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens opened, and I (Ezekiel) saw divine visions." (Ez 1: 1).

The Greek word for *voice* in this verse is *phone*. *Phone* is equivalent to the Hebrew word *quol*. (See exegesis above on Psalm 29 relative to the *quol Yahweh*).

With voice of the Father, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus the Son, God is revealing not only the identity of Jesus but is revealing Himself as the Holy Trinity. The heavenly voice combines phrases from the OT: "My son" (Ps 2:7 = the Davidic king as the adopted son of God), the "beloved" (Gen 22:2 = Isaac), and "with whom I am well pleased" (Isa 42:1, 44:2 = God's servant).<sup>3</sup>

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3. Harrington, Daniel J; The Gospel of Matthew—The Sacra Pagina Series; L.P.; Collegeville, MN; page 62.

## Reflection

This weekend we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Our Gospel is the scene of the Baptism of Jesus. John the Baptist was proclaiming a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Thousands of people were entering the water of the Jordan River to have their sins washed away, to be cleansed and refreshed by the living water and to rise to newness of life.

Water is an ancient symbol of human life. The Holy Land is surrounded by very arid desert like terrain. People were very cognizant of the need for a water supply to sustain life. The people of the region typically lived near the several bodies of water in the area. Many made their living by fishing and the waters provided for their livelihood. The Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea were also known for their violent storms. Water was seen as both the giver and taker of life. Its power over life was well known to the people.

Once at a school Mass I asked the children why Jesus allowed Himself to be baptized, and I pointed out the fact that He was without sin. One little girl looked at me as if I had asked a really dumb question and said, "He had to go into the water to make the water holy." It was not the specific answer that I was looking for. It was a better answer. Jesus entered into the water to make the waters of baptism holy forever.

When Jesus entered the water of the Jordan River He entered fully into our humanity. The word Emmanuel is translated, "God is with us." The question is, "How is God with us"? God is with us in Jesus. Jesus emptied Himself to fully enter into our human condition. St. John Paul II used the word "solidarity" to describe how God is with us in Jesus. In Jesus, God enters into a deep solidarity with the human race. As Jesus entered into the Jordan River where sins are being washed away, He takes on our sins and will take those sins to the Cross. John the Baptist confirms this as he cries out, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

When Jesus came out of the water the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit was seen coming down upon Jesus in the form of a dove. The dove is an ancient symbol of love. God's love pours out upon the world and into humanity through Jesus who is now standing in solidarity with us. All things came into being through Him and God is now reconciling the world to Himself through Him, Jesus the Word made flesh. God's love is made visible in the incarnation. God's love enters into us through Jesus who is now with us standing in the waters of our lives.

As the Christmas season comes to a close, we must remember that our calling is to become the Body of Christ. We must become what we receive at the altar. We must allow the Holy Spirit to enter into us, to fill us and then allow that same Spirit to flow through us. And this is made possible by Jesus entering into the waters of our life. He shares in our humanity so that we may share in His divinity. We are the rest of the story of Christmas. The Christmas season must continue with us. We must become the incarnation of the Spirit. So come Holy Spirit and fill the hearts of us Your faithful and enkindle in us the fire of Your love.

Yours in Christ,



## Personal Witness

I was blessed to attend the University of St. Mary of the Lake – Mundelein Seminary, Mundelein, Illinois from the fall of 1994 until graduation in the spring of 1999. During that time Cardinal Joseph Bernardine was Cardinal of the Archdiocese of Chicago. During my time at the seminary, until his death in November of 1996, Cardinal Bernardine was a frequent visitor and was on a first name basis with most of the students and faculty. He would often celebrate Mass with us and preach and then join the students for dinner after.

Cardinal Bernardine was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer early in 1995. He often shared his experiences and his struggles with the disease that would take his life at the age of 68. Near the end of his life, in the fall of 1996, he came to talk with us one last time to bless us and to say farewell. We met in the chapel and gathered around him as he sat in a wheelchair. He was very weak and struggling to speak above a whisper. He reminded us one more time to tell people how much God loves them and tell them often. He challenged us to be faithful to the Lord and faithful to our calling as priests. I have tried to do that throughout my priesthood. People that know me, know how often I remind them of God's powerful personal love for them.

He shared with us his experience going through cancer treatments. During the time of his illness, he ended up spending a great deal of time in the hospital ministering to fellow cancer patients. He said that he had never felt so close to people in his entire life as the bond of love and solidarity that he felt with fellow patients going through shared struggles. He said that for the first time in his life he felt that he understood what the word Emmanuel really means. By entering into our human experience, by entering into the waters of our baptism, Jesus enters into solidarity with us. God humbles Himself to share our humanity in all things but sin. Jesus shares in our joys and our sorrows and our suffering and death. God with us means much more than His physical presence in our world. It means even more than an indwelling abiding presence within us. He allows Himself to become one of the patients as He takes on our infirmities. He becomes the wounded healer.

The Gospels reveal Jesus who has a deep love and compassion for us. Often, we hear the expression, "He was moved to the depth of His being." We saw Him weep at the sight of His friend Lazarus. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus exclaimed, "My soul is sorrowful unto death." Jesus experienced love betrayed, love rejected, and love crucified.

And so, Jesus, who had no sin, entered the waters of the Jordan. As Jesus entered into the river where sins are being washed away, He takes on our sins and will take those sins to the Cross. He is Savior because He is Emmanuel, and He is Emmanuel because He is in deep solidarity with us.

