

Ken Overberg, S.J.

Baptism of Jesus, January 13, 2019

Quickly our liturgical year moves from Epiphany last week to the baptism of Jesus today. We skip all those years and experiences that shaped Jesus: growing into adulthood in the midst of his family, pondering the Scriptures, listening to the hills that surround Nazareth, reacting to the presence of the Roman occupiers.

Today's celebration acts as a bridge, marking the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of the numbered Sundays (what we call "ordinary time"). All four gospels in some way mention John's baptizing and Jesus' presence nearby. Mark, Matthew, and Luke mention Jesus being baptized; John omits the baptism but includes various details of the scene as described in the synoptics.

Jesus' baptism evidently was a very special experience for the early communities to remember it. In some ways, though, the baptism must have been seen as an embarrassment to the followers of Jesus. How could it be that Jesus, Messiah and Lord, needed to be or at least chose to be baptized? Perhaps this is why the gospel of John omits the actual baptism.

The gospels' descriptions of John the Baptist and Jesus, of course, are told from the perspective of Jesus' followers. At the time, John was better known. Both had disciples, and there must have been competition on both sides to "set the record straight." All this makes the synoptic gospels' accounts of Jesus being baptized by John even more remarkable.

So why was this event remembered and handed on? Perhaps because of its significance for Jesus' understanding of his life and vision for his ministry. Taking seriously that Jesus was fully human (as the Church teaches—and also fully

divine) we recognize that Jesus had to discern his life's path just like we all do. His encounter with John and the baptism must have marked a turning point in Jesus' life, giving him a deepening sense of being God's "beloved," called to live and proclaim Abba God's loving presence, the Reign of God. The specifics of all this would have to be worked out and confirmed in the doing. In all four gospels, the stories of Jesus and John the Baptist mark the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

Today's first reading, the first of the Suffering Servant songs, gives us words from the unknown prophet we call Second Isaiah, words addressed to a broken people in exile, words of tenderness and comfort, call and challenge, words used by the early Christian community to describe Jesus' ministry, words for our lives as baptized disciples of Jesus, chosen and beloved.

Let's listen carefully!

+++++

Psychologist Abraham Maslow called them peak experiences—those moments of special clarity and sense of wholeness. According to the gospels, for Jesus it was not a mountaintop, but the Jordan River. His baptism seems to have been such a moment, deepening his sense of God's loving and faithful presence, stirring Jesus' imagination about how to live life, along with the courage to begin his ministry.

Many of us do not remember our baptism, but may recall a moment or event or decision when that baptism became real for us. Perhaps it was an Easter vigil or an awareness of oppression or the long, faithful love of a friend or spouse. Perhaps it was a tragedy or some profound challenge or simply witnessing another's baptism. In that time of grace, we knew ourselves to be God's beloved, a member of God's chosen ones, called to serve and forgive and love. Beloved, chosen and

anointed to be a light in the darkness of our everyday world.

Take some time this week to ponder your identity and call. Relive your mountaintop or River Jordan or more ordinary experiences of new life, new vision, new commitment. Picture the faces; hear the voices; feel the grace. What is the meaning, the invitation for your life now?