

Scripture Unpacked

As Catholics, we believe that the Bible is the living Word of God. That alone should give us reason to pay attention, but there's more! Scripture offers us lessons and wisdom that can be beneficial to OUR lives – right now! At today's Mass we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, but it is also a reminder and celebration of our own Baptism.

Today's gospel is a reminder that we are baptized with the Holy Spirit, not merely with water. To be baptized with the Holy Spirit means that we are drawn into communion with God and we are also empowered by that communion to make a difference in the world—to reach out a helping hand to those in need and to proclaim the good news of Jesus through our actions and our words.

Sunday Readings:

Reading #1: Isaiah 42:1-7

Responsorial Psalm: 29:1-10

Reading #2: Acts 10:34-38

Gospel: Mark 1:7-11

A full copy of the readings for the week can be found on the U.S. Bishop's website:

<https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/011021.cfm>

Gospel Reflection

Scriptural context – Mark and Isaiah

Today's first reading from Isaiah 42 begins with the very words that come from heaven during the baptism of Jesus in the gospel. It comes from the first of four passages from the book of Isaiah that are known as the Servant Songs. The Servant Songs in Isaiah provided a great deal of inspiration to Mark. The imagery and even specific language used in Isaiah to describe the messiah who will come is scattered throughout the gospel of Mark and subsequently the other gospels as well. Mark's depiction of Jesus as the messiah is characterized by the image of the suffering servant.

Messianic Secret

The baptism of Jesus in the gospel of Mark serves as a revelation of the identity of Jesus. Throughout this gospel there is secrecy about who Jesus really is. Whenever a person's faith reveals that Jesus is the Messiah or the Son of God, Jesus commands them to remain silent and not tell anyone else about him. However, through the baptism event, the reader is let in to the secret from the outset. Unlike the public announcements of Jesus as the beloved Son of God that occurs in other gospels, in the gospel of Mark, the voice is addressed to Jesus himself and there is no indication that anyone else hears it. The words used are, "You are my Son" not, "This is my Son." But the reader is placed in the privileged position of knowing the truth about Jesus from the very beginning of the gospel. As they read further, they observe the disciples' growing yet imperfect understanding of this truth.

John the Baptist serves another particular function in the gospel story. Aside from fulfilling scriptural prophecy by proclaiming the one who is to come, he provides a point of contrast with Jesus. In many ways, John represents the Jewish religious belief of the time. For John, baptism is a ritual of purifying and forgiveness of sin that can be administered as often as required. The way to God is through strict observance of the Law and through ritual acts of prayer and purification. For Jesus though, the way to God is through love and through Jesus himself. The baptism that Jesus will give is a baptism of the Spirit—pouring out the Spirit on those who realize and accept the love of God in their lives.

Questions for Adolescents

- Q. What purpose is served by John preaching about someone “more powerful” than himself?
- Q. How do you think John’s followers might have responded to Jesus’ arrival?
- Q. What is the difference between a baptism of water and being baptized with the Holy Spirit?
- Q. Why does Mark include the reader in the secret of Jesus’ truth from the beginning of the gospel?

Questions for Adults

- Q. Why does Jesus need to be baptized by John?
- Q. Why might the gospel of Mark begin with John the Baptist rather than the birth of Jesus?
- Q. What do you think motivates parents today to have their children baptized?
- Q. Why are we invited to renew our baptismal promises every Easter?

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