

[The Baptism of Jesus—January 13, 2013 year C G. G. West]

At one time or another, I am guessing that each of us has experienced anticipation that has consumed our every waking moments. We anticipate our birthdays, our weddings, our ordinations and even for the youngest among us Christmas. Sometimes this anticipation makes it almost impossible to sleep.

In today's Gospel, it is this kind of anticipation that the Jews had as they were waiting for the expected Messiah. Of course it should be noted that the anticipation had been going on in Israel for at least 700 to 800 years. So with the appearance of John the Baptist and his immanent pronouncement to "prepare the way of the Lord," there was heightened expectation and anticipation.

We might also join in this sense of expectation as we live in a world waiting for the Second Coming and our wait has been 2000 years. But there is a large difference between those who stood on the banks of the Jordan and us here because we know something they did not know: we know who the Messiah is and that is Jesus Christ. We also know that in our baptism we have already been claimed by Jesus Christ and redeemed of all our sins.

There is something else that we should take away from the Gospel story of Jesus' Baptism: the people were confused. They wondered whether John was the Messiah but John said there was one more powerful than he who would baptize not with water but the Holy Spirit and with fire. And after the people had been baptized, and after Jesus was baptized and was praying, "the heaven was opened

and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

I would imagine that many did not understand the significance of that moment because it was not what was expected. Jesus did not come in glory; he did not come as a warrior or a prince in a chariot. I have been reminded and we all should be reminded that he came as a poor baby in a manger. He came as a child—the son of a young girl, Mary—spending his childhood in Joseph’s carpenter shop. He came as just another in a long line who stepped into the Jordan River to be baptized by a street preacher. He came as a wandering teacher who had followers who were fishermen, tax collectors, and prostitutes. He came as a rejected rabbi who was nailed to a cross. He came down from heaven as God but also one of

us to save us not to condemn us. God came to us in the person of Jesus. We did not go to God. God came to us and claimed us.

God came to us in surprising ways. In our baptism, we are marked with the cross of Christ forever.

Through his grace we die with him and we are reborn with him. We are set right with God—not by any action that do on our own—but through the incredibly surprising generous act of God.

I am sure that each of us at some point in our lives have been asked the question, “When were you saved?” I will not presume to answer this question for you but I am prepared to answer it for myself: I was saved by an action that occurred two thousand years ago when I was claimed by Jesus Christ.

So in my baptism, which occurred when I as an infant and I was unable to understand what was happening,

God came to me and claimed me. It was an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace: it was a powerful, moving, emotional and life altering God moment. This is an important event for me because I share in the baptism of Jesus himself.

We know that people came from all around to be baptized by John because they were looking for hope and grace in their sinful world. There were cheaters and tax thieves. They were broken and selfish and many were downtrodden and at the end of their rope. And into this line of misfits and sinners Jesus jumps into the line with them. He was not only identifying with the people but was acknowledging the tragic world of that time. When he comes out of the water and prays, he is greeted by God himself with the heavens torn open and the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. Then a voice from heaven came down and said, “You are my Son, the Beloved;

with you I am well pleased.” At this moment Jesus is recognized by all the people who heard the voice and by all in heaven, as God’s son, as the Messiah.

John may have anticipated Jesus coming and that Jesus would be the Messiah that all were waiting for. However, I am guessing that John was surprised nor could he have anticipated the holy dove coming down and the voice making the proclamation. That is how God interacts with us: no matter how much we think we can guess what God will do, God always has something bigger in mind which is a surprise.

In the end, no matter how old the person may be who is baptized or how the baptism is done all come out of the water to acknowledge the work that God has already done in our lives. And so we now are able to follow him into ministry to the entire world. All God asks of us is to love him and believe in him. Praying is how we show our love. Prayer is nothing more or

less than a conversation with God and in our prayer we show God that we love him.

Baptism is the beginning and it is only the beginning..

When I was in seminary, we all used to say that Baptism was how we were identified as Christians and the Eucharist is the glue that keeps the community together.

I urge you to not just say the words of the prayer of thanksgiving after the communion today but think about the meaning and implications of the prayer:

[at the 8am service] “And we humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father, so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all

such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in...”

or

[At the 10 am service] “Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart...”

Amen.