

January 12, 2025
Baptism of Jesus
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I don't know about you all, but I have been utterly captivated in the most unfortunate way by the fires in Los Angeles this week

As you may recall, I did my seminary studies in Northern California and so I know lots of people living throughout the state, including LA

I know many of you have connections to Southern California and I can only imagine that you, too, have watched the headlines and images with as much concern and dread as I have

I think it's fair to say that we all know people who have been affected by the fires, whether it be celebrities or personal friends and family

My dear friend and the current Lutheran Bishop in LA lost her home in the Eaton Fire and I know many more people who have evacuated to safety

From afar, all I can do is watch in agony and pray

This perspective of being on the sidelines of big moments of devastation or disaster is not one that is unfamiliar to any of us

Media today brings us right into the fires of LA, the floods in North Carolina, the rubble of Gaza

We're also not unfamiliar to being on the sidelines of major moments in the lives of our loved ones and friends: on the sidelines of death, illness, fires, or other major life events

Moments when we feel an awful lot like the crowd of people in this morning's gospel who came to the water's edge – people filled with expectation, with questioning in their hearts – wondering “is this when the Messiah shows up?”

The crowd on the banks of the river in this morning's gospel come to see if it is the baptizer, John, who is the Messiah

He makes it very clear he is not: “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

No, it is not the baptizer who is the Messiah – it is the baptized, Jesus, his cousin

Which brings up an interesting conundrum – why does Jesus need to be baptized?

As we know from stories about John, and even from his comment to the crowd I just mentioned, John offered a baptism of water for the cleansing of sin, but wasn't Jesus sinless?

That is certainly the traditional teaching of both the Western and Eastern expressions of the Christian Church

The Jesus Seminar – a movement that started in the mid-1980's to see if they could nail down the real Jesus through the scriptures – broke from this tradition and believed Jesus was a mortal man and therefore likely as sinful as any other person¹

But, the traditional teachings have been that Jesus was sinless – so, why did he get baptized?

Theologians that I read this week spoke to this very point, and without getting overly complicated, they preach that Jesus was baptized in solidarity with the rest of us

Dan Clendenin, writing for *Journey with Jesus*, said: “[Jesus] allied himself with the faults and failures, the pains and the problems, and with all the broken and hurting people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside us and among us.”²

Jesus came to join us at the riverbank, filled with expectation and questioning in our hearts

Jesus was baptized in solidarity with all of us on the sidelines – choosing close proximity to humankind and all our failings rather than standing aloof and preaching from afar

This was Jesus' divine calling – Luke's story tells us so!

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Seminar

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3791-you-belong-to-god>

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

Dan Clendenin, again, writes: “Jesus's baptismal solidarity with broken people was vividly confirmed by divine affirmation and empowerment. Still wet with water after his cousin had plunged him beneath the Jordan River, Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision — the declaration of God...that Jesus was [the] beloved son, and the descent of God the Spirit in the form of a dove. The vision and the voice punctuated the baptismal event. They signaled the meaning, the message and the mission of Jesus...that by the power of the Spirit, [Jesus] embodied [God's] unconditional love for all people everywhere.”

Baptized Jesus – “God with us” at the riverbank – meets us in our sorrow and our despair.

Baptized Jesus moves with us from the riverbank to action and help, justice and liberation

Baptized Jesus loves us toward healing and regrowth

Our Prayers of the People this week come from a resource called RitePlanning - it's an online worship-planning resource sponsored by the Episcopal Church

I picked them because the call and response between the Chalice Bearer and us as a congregation for this Sunday, took my breath away when I read it – by virtue of this gospel reading about Jesus' baptism, the call is “Walk with us through the waters, O God;” and the response is “walk with us through the fire.”

An incredible coincidence? A God moment?

Jesus' baptism is his first of many acts of solidarity with the people of the world

Many of those who came to the riverbank that day searching for the Messiah were looking for a leader with a sword or a political agenda

When in reality, the Messiah who gets the verbal and symbolic endorsement of God, is the baptized Jesus who instead chooses a ministry of radical solidarity

Solidarity with the evacuees, the newly homeless, the firefighters, and the deceased

Solidarity with the spectators, the politicians, and the community organizers

And, not to be left out, solidarity with the charred earth, the smoked-filled air, and the displaced fauna

Baptized Jesus came to live in solidarity with the whole world – and baptized Jesus came to live in solidarity with you in all your life's joys and challenges, too

Whether it be the literal waters or fires of the world – which is what initially took my breath away from the prayers this week – or whether it be the figurative waters and fires of our personal lives, Jesus is with us – which gives my lungs breath once again

Jesus, in radical love and solidarity, walks with us through the waters.

And, he walks with us through the fire.

We, too, were baptized into this radical solidarity – radical solidarity with Jesus and his ministries of love and grace, but also radical solidarity with God's whole creation to share that love and grace as widely as we can

Just think of the Covenant that we make at baptism: we promise to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ; to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves; to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being; and, to cherish the wondrous works of God, and protect the beauty and integrity of all creation.

Radical solidarity

Perhaps, then, as baptized Jesus comes alongside us at the riverbank filled with expectations and questions, we too can come alongside our communities in their times of expectations and questions – despair, wondering, and grief

It is the strength of the one who came beside us first, that gives us the strength and confidence to come beside others next

Jesus, in radical love and solidarity, walks with us through the waters.

And, he walks with us through the fire.

Thanks be to God. Amen.