

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ



Place a bowl of water, three candles, and matches at the center of your group.

CANDLE 1: (*Lights first candle.*) I light a light to praise God, who shares divinity with us.

ALL: God is above and beyond us, beneath and behind us.

CANDLE 2: (*Lights second candle.*) I light a light to praise God, who shares humanity with us.

ALL: God is with us and among us, beside and before us.

CANDLE 3: (*Lights third candle.*) I light a light to praise God, who gives us life, unsettles and inspires us.

ALL: God is around and within us, here and now.

LEADER: Today we celebrate Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his mission. He is not alone. He lives in the embrace of the three who live in one love.

ALL: Free us from all that separates us from communion in God.

LEADER: Let us make the Sign of the Cross with water or sprinkle ourselves to remember our baptismal commitment to Jesus' mission.

Hold the bowl for the person to the right.

LEADER: In Christ we are God's beloved.

ALL: The Spirit is upon us to bring forth justice. Amen.

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SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

Matthew Shepard was beaten to death simply because he was gay. At the sentencing of his killer, Matthew's father, Dennis Shepard, insisted that his son had not been alone after his batterers left him tied to a fence outside Laramie, Wyoming, even though 18 hours passed before a biker found him. Mr. Shepard sees Matthew in the embrace of lifelong friends:

There were his lifelong friends with him, friends that he had grown up with...

First, he had the beautiful night sky and the same stars and moon that we used to see through a telescope. Then he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him. And through it all he was breathing in the scent of the pine trees from the snowy range. He heard the wind, the ever present Wyoming wind, for the last time. He had one more friend with him; he had God. And I feel better knowing he wasn't alone.

Jesus' baptism is a moment like Matthew's. Jesus is not alone but in the embrace of Father and Spirit.

For many Catholics and other Christians their baptism takes place in the embrace of family, friends, and parish congregation. When our family last gathered for a baptism, the deacon invited us to sign the child's forehead with a cross. His parents, grandparents, and godparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, each in turn made the mark of faith on his forehead, expressing their desire that he grow up in their faith. His great grandmother, who prayed for them all each day by name, was still alive and blessed him.

● Who surrounded you at your baptism and desired faith for you?



Sunday Readings: Isaiah 55.1-11 1John 5.1-9 Mark 1.7-11

GOSPEL

On Jesus God's favor rests.

JOHN THE BAPTIST: One more powerful than I is to come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps. I have baptized you in water; he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit.

NARRATOR: At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. Immediately on coming up out of the water he saw the sky

splitting open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. Then a voice came from the heavens.

VOICE: You are my beloved Son. In you I am well pleased.

Mark 1.7-11



The heavens splitting open points to a new communication between heaven and earth. The prayer from the Advent readings that God would rend the heavens and rain down the Just One has happened. In Jesus God is with us and one of us. The good news Jesus will begin announcing is, “The kingdom of God is among you” (1.15).

The Spirit's descent like a dove echoes the creation story in which the Spirit of God hovers over the waters of life (Genesis 1.2). The Spirit's descent upon Jesus points to him as beginning a new creation.

The Spirit's descent upon Jesus is also an anointing. Israel anointed its kings for office with oil. *Messiah* means *anointed* one in Hebrew. The prophets who speak in the book of Isaiah promise God will be faithful to Israel. They describe a Spirit-filled messiah who will build peace rather than lead the kingdom into war, a king anointed by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor. The coming of the Spirit upon Jesus anoints him for the ministry of liberating humankind and inviting us all into the embrace of Father, Son, and Spirit in a new creation.

The voice that speaks from heaven proclaims Jesus is God's Son. The tender words “beloved” and “In you I am well pleased” echo Isaiah 42.1-4, 6-7, Sunday's first reading, a voice from the exile. This passage from Isaiah describes the people of Israel whom the Babylonians held captive

Jesus' baptism reveals who he is.

Mark's gospel, the first to be written, begins with Jesus the adult, God's beloved Son and servant. Only eight verses precede Mark's account of Jesus' baptism. We heard this prologue, in which John the Baptist prepares Jesus' way, as our gospel on the 2nd Sunday of Advent.

Sunday's gospel begins by recalling John the Baptist's promise that one is coming who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. The next sentence brings Jesus into the narrative but not to baptize. Instead he receives John's baptism. Jesus begins his ministry by standing with and among those who repent and turn to God.

Jesus' baptism among sinners and seekers is half of the scene Mark pictures in Sunday's gospel. In the other half the story describes three manifestations of the divine dimensions of his identity. As Jesus comes out of the water,

the heavens split. The Spirit anoints Jesus for the ministry he is about to begin. The voice from heaven calls Jesus “my beloved Son.”

Jesus' ministry begins unfolding in the next six Sunday gospels as he heals a leper, frees a man of an evil spirit, raises up a sick woman to service, and preaches the good news of God's nearness from village to village. On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus says that he has come “not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10.45).

● How does his baptism foreshadow Jesus' life?

The three details in Mark's account that reveal the divine dimensions of Jesus' identity give us images with important Old Testament echoes. These echoes tell us God is at work anew in our world but in continuity with Israel's past.

in exile as God's servant. Their suffering, this prophecy claims, will fulfill God's purposes to make God known among the nations.

Jesus, like the people in exile, is God's servant; his power is his unique and loving relationship with God. Who hears Jesus hears the Father and Spirit. Who is one with the beloved is one with the Father and Spirit. Who lives in communion with Christ is one in love with all whom the Father embraces and the Spirit vivifies. At Jesus' baptism we glimpse the Trinity, the mystery of God who is not a solitary monarch or a static substance but dynamically alive in relationship.

- How does the art on page 2 express who Jesus is?
- What do you learn about Jesus' mission and ministry in this gospel?

Mark's baptismal account identifies Jesus as God's beloved Son and servant, one with the Father and Spirit. Baptized Christians share

Jesus' identity. We are God's beloved, whom Jesus calls to join him in the embrace of God. We are God's servants, who share Jesus' mission of calling all those we meet into this embrace. We are baptized into one faith, one Spirit—a communion that calls us beyond the limits of any one Christian denomination.

In celebrating Jesus' mission, we affirm our own anointing for ministry in baptism and confirmation. We recognize our call to unfold Jesus' servant story in our lives among the people of our world.

- In what ways do your baptism and anointing in the Spirit challenge you to lead?



Come to the banquet of life.

In Isaiah 40-55 a prophet referred to as Second Isaiah speaks, comforting the people of Israel in exile in Babylon and promising

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- As Congress assembles in Washington, D.C., consider writing a card(s) to your senators

and representative. Use your own language to describe the importance of their work for the common good and your hope for what they might accomplish by reaching across the aisle.

- Visit and consider joining in a ministry in your area that you know little about—perhaps the food shelf, a meal program, or outreach to immigrants.

that their faithful God has not forgotten them. The prophet calls the people to listen, seek God, seek forgiveness, and live. God forgives their idolatry and neglect of the poor and calls them to be servants who make God known and bring forth justice among the nations.

In 540 B.C. God is about to do something new. In the victories of Persian king Cyrus over the Babylonians, Second Isaiah sees God making a road home through the wilderness from Babylon (Baghdad today) to their homeland.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "There are people so hungry that God cannot appear to them as anything but bread." In chapter 55 Second Isaiah speaks for the Holy One, the creator, calling us to bring our every hunger and thirst to the banquet of life in creation.



Come to the water, eat and drink for free in the abundance of creation, delight in the rich fare of God's word. God is near and can be found.

Isaiah recalls God steadfast, sure love for David. The prophet declares the exiles will return home to Israel and be witnesses to their God's faithfulness. God can be found in this change of world powers, so seek the Holy One in this moment.

God is God, forgiving in ways we are not. Pope Francis insists, "God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking God's mercy" (*Joy of the Gospel* #3).

God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Many of us cling to Isaiah's word in the face of events beyond our understanding.

The prophetic poetry ends in pure promise: "My word shall not return to me empty." The promise inspires the exiles' journey home to become a people again.

Come to the water.

Thus says, the Holy One:
All you who are thirsty,
come to the water!
You who have no money,
come, receive grain and eat;
come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk!

Why spend your money
for what is not bread,
your wages for what fails to satisfy?
Listen carefully to me,
and you shall eat well,
you shall delight in rich fare.
Incline your ear and come to me—
listen, so that you may live.

I will renew with you
the everlasting covenant,
my steadfast love promised to David.
As I made him a witness to the
peoples,

a leader and commander of nations,
so shall you summon a nation
you knew not and a nation
that knew you not will run to you,

Seek God while God may be found,
call upon the Holy One
while the Holy One is near.
Let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the
Holy One for mercy
to our God, who is abundantly
forgiving.

For my thoughts are not your
thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways,
says the Holy One.
As high as the heavens
are above the earth
so high are my ways above your
ways
and my thoughts above your
thoughts.

For as rain and snow come
down from the heavens
and do not return there
until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower
and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be
that goes forth from my mouth;
my word shall not return
to me empty,
but shall do my will,
achieving the end for
which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:1-11

- What satisfies your hungers?
- In what ways has creation proved priceless in your experience?
- When have you prayed any of these words?
- What words of God have become seeds of commitment in you?
- What promise do you experience in the world of rain and snow, seeds and wheat?

PRAY

Send one another forth in the following prayer as a conclusion to your reflection on Jesus' baptism and your own Christian commitment.

LEADER: Jesus calls us to form a new creation.

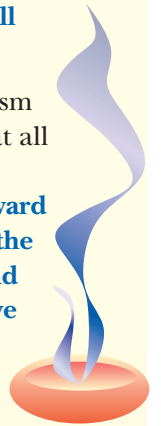
ALL: Let us go forward in peace to love and serve the Lord Jesus in all people.

LEADER: The Spirit of the Lord rests upon us.

ALL: Let us go forward in peace to love and serve the Lord Jesus in all people.

LEADER: Our baptism calls us to work that all may be one.

ALL: Let us go forward in the embrace of the Father, the Son, and Spirit with whom we shall live forever and ever.



Leader sprinkles group with water.

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