

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

By J. Michael Byron

Include a bowl of water, plant, and three candles in your environment.

CANDLE 1: (*Light 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: (*Light 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: (*Light third candle.*) I light a light to praise the 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 but 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 the water or sprinkle ourselves to remember our baptism commitment to Jesus' mission. (*Pass bowl.*)

LEADER: In Christ we are God's beloved.

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

For John the Baptist, baptism is a turning toward God. The washing is an act of repentance and change of heart that marks a new starting point. Jesus discerns his mission in this setting among people seeking God and goodness.

Today families usually baptize children as new babies. It's a family event with godparents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles that the baby won't remember. At a weekend eucharist the whole parish community welcomes a new member, claps, and sings.

Birthdays. Baptism days. Both are important anniversaries for building up memories and meaning. Birthdays mark our welcome into life, breath, growth, and family. Baptism is our welcome into the new life we share with Jesus as his brothers

and sisters and with the Christian community.

When is your birthday?

What is your baptism day?

Baptism begins with a powerful welcome. The priest or deacon greets and marks us with the sign of the cross, saying: "The Christian community welcomes you with great joy. In its name I claim you for Christ our Savior by the sign of his cross." Parents, godparents, and others may sign us with the cross, also. Who marked you with the cross at your baptism?



As babies we are not yet the searchers we become. Parents speak for us—our name, why we have come. “What do you ask of God’s Church?” a priest or deacon asks. “Baptism,” they say and later in the rite promise to teach us about Jesus, his gospel, and the traditions of the Church.

Together priest, parents, family, parish community all profess faith in God as life-giving creator and in Jesus as God’s Son, our brother, and our savior. We declare our faith in God, in the life-giving Spirit, in Church, and in the hope of life forever with God.

What is the name of the community of faith, the parish church, where you were baptized?

Water washes, refreshes, and helps living things grow. Water is the sign of baptism. The priest or deacon either pours water over us or immerses us in water saying, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit came upon him. At Baptism the Holy Spirit comes upon us to help us become like Jesus for others—welcoming all, loving and forgiving one another, sharing, and making peace. It is a call to holiness.

● **When have you experienced the Holy Spirit urging you to act like Jesus?**

GOSPEL

One is coming who will baptize with the Spirit.

NARRATOR 1: As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the messiah, John answered all of them by saying,

JOHN: 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.

NARRATOR 2: Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove. And a voice came from heaven.

VOICE: You are my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

Luke 3.15-16, 21-22



John preaches and baptizes in an upended world.

It’s hard to imagine what it must have been like to be a Jewish believer in God in the centuries before Jesus appeared on earth. Tragic events often upend Israel’s hopes and leave the people struggling to find a way forward.

Since the times of Moses more than a thousand years earlier, the people had placed their trust in Yahweh, who set them free from slavery in Egypt in the exodus. The gifts of the commandments and the Promised Land gave

them a way and a place to become a people. But every time the people think that they have been delivered from bondage once and for all, some terrible tragedy disrupts their expectations and threatens their hopes. If more powerful nations are not threatening them, the Israelites are quarreling among themselves.

Realizing they do not keep the commandments well enough on their own, they seek leadership. They pray for a mighty king to save them. Along comes

David and his son Solomon. Things look good until their descendents prove to be corrupt. The Assyrians invade and overrun the land of the northern tribes. The Babylonians invade, destroy Jerusalem, and carry away many of the leaders of the south to Babylon as captives.

After the exile many people return to Israel, rebuild their temple, and revive their worship, but Greek and Roman conquerors arrive, threatening the temple and their religious identity. By the time of John the Baptist, people wonder where to look for salvation. If God's salvation isn't able to come through the land, or the king, or temple worship, or the law, then how and where will it come?

Into this very unsettled state of affairs arrives John the Baptist; so it isn't surprising that many believers ask, when they listen to his bold and confident preaching, "Is this the one?" They must have been disappointed again to hear John's emphatic answer, "No!"

- How do God's actions in Israel's history reveal about God?
- What leadership do you offer in your faith community? Do you tend to lead more through prayer and solidarity or more through work for charity and justice?



The site at the Jordan River in Israel where pilgrims come for baptism today.

In Sunday's gospel we hear John the Baptist proclaim the imminent arrival of the messiah. John insists that salvation is not about him and his labors. Whatever success his ministry enjoys will be a credit to the one who baptizes with fire rather than merely with water.

Nobody works with greater zeal and tirelessness than John to make the people ready to welcome Christ. He insists that God's savior is near at hand. He prods the people to keep looking—yet again.

Finally, finally, as Jesus himself comes up out of the baptismal waters, a visible dove and an audible voice from heaven affirm that, at long last, this is one. "Behold my beloved Son, the reliable gateway to salvation!"

- Some religious people—both in olden days and today—believe that Jesus can be found by performing the right behaviors or by following moral laws rigorously enough. Is that true? What in our religious tradition makes you think so (or not think so)?

- We believe that baptism empowers and claims us for service in the church and in the world. What exactly does baptism empower, and how can we live out our baptisms faithfully?

FIRST READING

Why do we suffer?

Why does it seem that following God requires suffering? Do you think that God takes satisfaction (or even pleasure) when chosen ones suffer? Where does tragedy come from? From ourselves? From God? From Satan? From other bad people? How can we Christians begin to make sense out of suffering? Or isn't that possible?

DO SOMETHING

- January is Church Unity Month, a time to recognize that Christian churches hold the sacrament of baptism in common. Invite some members of another church in your area to share stories of baptism and growing up in your faiths.

Pastors and theologians have wrestled with these enormous questions for thousands of years. Today's reading from Isaiah about God's "Suffering Servant" (which is one of several such stories in Isaiah) pushes the issue squarely before our faces.

Often it can be tempting to spin theories that attempt to make sense out of what seems to be absurd suffering. But part of the very mystery of suffering for a Christian believer is that it resists being figured out. That can certainly be disconcerting, but the life of Christ gives us reason not to despair.

Jesus, like so many of the Jewish prophets before him, went to his death as an apparent failure. It was only at his resurrection that we were assured of victory, and even then God offered no explanation for why it had to be that way. As we are told elsewhere in the scriptures, we walk by faith and not by sight, and so we endure through suffering with the knowledge that vindication is to follow.

The scriptures we read on this day situate us exactly there. The prophet Isaiah describes Israel as God's suffering servant who, although required to bear hardship with faith, is called to be a herald of good news, to announce God is here. Israel

must trust God will shepherd them home, feed and lead the people, carry the lambs and lead the ewes. The glory of the Lord will be revealed and all will see it.

While the prophet credits God's power for leading Israel, God's servant must do more than just sit there. We are to be attentive to the real concrete work and ministry that God beckons us into here and now.

Israel Is God's Servant

Thus says the Holy One:
Here is my servant whom I uphold,
my chosen one
with whom I am well pleased,
upon whom I have put my spirit;
he shall bring forth justice to the nations,
not crying out, not shouting,
not making his voice heard in the street.

A bruised reed he shall not break,
and a smoldering wick
he shall not quench,
until he establishes justice on the earth;
the coastlands will wait for his teaching.

I, the Holy One, have called you to the victory of justice,
I have grasped you by the hand;
I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people,
a light for the nations,
to open the eyes of the blind,

to bring out prisoners from confinement,
and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.

Isaiah 42.1-4,6-7

● **How has suffering in your life made you more open to other's pain?**

PRAY

Pray from Sunday's second reading from Titus.

LEADER: When the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared,

ALL: He saved us not because of any righteous deed we had done but because of God's mercy,

LEADER: Through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,

ALL: Whom God richly poured out on us through Jesus Christ our savior.

LEADER: So that we might be justified by God's grace

ALL: And become heirs in hope of eternal life.

Amen.



Luke's Gospel: Written for Us

We read from Luke's gospel on 27 Sundays in 2022. Putting the stories we hear at Eucharist into the larger context of Luke's gospel leads to a richer understanding of Jesus' teaching. Sister Joan's new book breaks open Luke's word "written for us." Only \$10. Get your copy today.

J. Michael Byron is a priest of the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis, who is pastor of Pax Christi Community in Bloomington, Minnesota. He holds a Ph.D. from Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Cambridge, Massachusetts.