

HOMILY

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord *January 13, 2008*

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Have you noticed how much water has been in the news over the last few years? With Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the tsunami a few years ago in Southeast Asia, the current record drought in Atlanta and the Southeast, even the less dramatic storms and the snowstorms that disrupt our daily lives make the daily news. Water is part of the drama of our life. Water brings life; but not enough or too much can also bring destruction. Today we focus on the life-giving power of the waters of baptism. As we witness the baptism of Jesus by his cousin John in the waters of the Jordan, let's focus on the waters where we were baptized.

Now when we talk about baptism, we're not talking just about being saved. Granted, it is a time when God's love and forgiveness are experienced; it is a time of change. The change isn't so much instantly, a once and forever event. In our Catholic family, we see baptism as a beginning. It begins at the moment water is poured over us and we spend the rest of our lives trying to live up to the fullness of baptism.

When we really focus on baptism as a beginning, we begin a process or journey. We begin to see the world differently, to see each other differently and even to see ourselves differently. Baptism is not a trial-free membership but an initiation into a way of life in which Jesus promised there would be trials before we come into the glory of his kingdom. Jesus' baptism serves as a model for our baptism. For Jesus, baptism represents the beginning of his ministry. *The Baptism of Jesus* is one of our favorite stories. We love to hear how the heavens opened, to imagine the dove descending, and to hear God's blessing on the Son. We would like to think something like that happens when we are baptized. What we should be prepared for is that our journey of faith, much like Jesus' journey, continues to unfold long after our baptism.

As we live out our baptism begin we transform our lives so we think, speak, live, and act in ways that represent to the world the image of Christ. Baptism transforms stinginess into generosity, narrow-mindedness into thoughtful consideration, and prejudice into love. Baptism transforms our fear of one another into a desire for true community. Baptism transforms groups of people into churches, gatherings of individuals into a family of brothers and sisters. Our baptism is personal, but it is not private. We are now included alongside others. By God's design, we now belong to God and we belong to one another.

And as we are included along side others, we realize that for the body to be healthy, each of us must come forth to do our share. We are partners in the church. With baptism comes the Spirit, and with the Spirit come gifts to be used in the service of God. When we enter the household of God, we receive a calling from God to some particular work that will utilize our gifts in building up his body and to make our world a holier and better place.

For many of you, that call is immediately brought to you in one or several of our many ministries. You may find your gift to be teaching a young child to read or sitting with an elderly person while a family member needs to do errands. Another person's gift may be helping the working homeless to find a decent, safe place to live. Another person's gift may be in organizing a community's awareness of violence in their community to try to change what is going on all around us.

There is a folk tale from India that summarizes the whole gift of baptism. It seems that there was a good king who ruled wisely and who ruled well. One day the king called his three daughters together and told them he was leaving on a long journey. "I wish to learn about God," he told them "so I will need to go away and spend a long time in prayer. In my absence I will leave the three of you in charge. Before I leave I would like to leave each of you with a gift; a gift I hope you use wisely to help others to know this too." Then he placed in each of their hands a single grain of rice.

The first daughter tied a long golden thread around her grain of rice and placed it in a beautiful crystal box. Every day she looked at it and reminded herself that she was powerful. The second daughter took one look at the common grain of rice and threw it away thinking, "What good is one little grain of rice?" The third daughter just looked at her grain of rice for a long, long time until she finally understood

what to do with it. She went outside and planted it in the ground and it became a seed, giving life beyond itself, eventually turning into vast fields of hope and nourishment for others, feeding the poor and giving bread to the hungry.

When the father returned years later, he asked his three daughters what they had done with their gains of rice. Though he was polite to his first two daughters, he did not respond to their explanations with much enthusiasm. It was only after the king saw the fields of grain resulting from his third daughter's wisdom that he responded with delight. Taking the crown off his head, he placed it on hers saying, "Beloved daughter, you alone have learned the meaning of life. To give is to receive. To take our gifts and to share them so that others may reap from them."

And so, dear friends, sisters and brothers in Jesus, this day we remember the blessings and power of baptism. We, too, have been given great gifts. We not only belong to God, but we belong to one another, and we are set apart as sisters and brothers of God's family for particular tasks in his ministry. So I pray that all of us will discover those gifts and, like the third daughter, to be instruments of greater glory and bring about greater results for God's purpose, too.

And so on this day of our baptism, let us make the Sign of the Cross as we thank God for belonging to him.

In the name of the Father,
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen