

HOMILY

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord *January 11, 2009*

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Today we hear how John the Baptist baptized the very Son of God. Jesus did not need to be baptized because of his sin, but as an example for us. Baptism is a powerful symbol for the Christian; more powerful than many church people are aware.

You and I have a script by which we live. Think of a script from which an actor reads. Each of us has a script in his or her brain by which we live our lives both consciously and unconsciously. This script is the result of a lifetime of influences. Part of the script comes from the rituals in which our families engage. For some of us, this may be as simple as “my dad always said....”

Once, an eleven-year-old boy went fishing one night with his father. Suddenly the boy's pole doubled over. He knew something huge was on the other end. With much effort, he reeled it in. It was the largest bass he had ever seen! His father watched proudly but then looked at his watch. It was 10 PM, two hours before the bass season opened. “You'll have to put it back,” the father said. The boy couldn't believe what his father was saying. No one was around. No one would know. Why should he throw it back in? That was thirty-four years ago. Today, the boy is a successful architect in New York City. He still lives by the ethic his father taught him that night. That is part of his script. Part of the script comes from our family.

Part of the script comes from our surrounding culture, especially television and advertising. The average American, we're told, is bombarded with up to three thousand ads per day! These ads may be as vapid as “You Only Go Around Once in Life” or “Because I'm Worth It!” or “Just Do It!” With enough repetition, these messages become part of us.

Central to our cultural script is the assumption that happiness comes in a bottle or in a product or in a service. Try this product or treatment or process and counteract every ache and pain and discomfort and trouble so that life may be lived without inconvenience.

It all sounds well and good. But there is a problem. The script has failed. It promised to keep us safe and make us happy and fulfilled. But the truth is it has instead produced new depths of insecurity and new waves of unhappiness. Every survey tells us that though we live better than any previous generation on earth, never have we been unhappier and more uncertain about our future. The script has failed. Never have we been so disconnected from the things that really matter.

I read a cartoon in which a family is setting up camp in the woods. They have brought their TV set, camera phones, video games and a box full of electronic devices. “It’s a good thing we’ve got this stuff,” one of the kids is saying, “or we couldn’t shut out the noise of that stream and waterfall.”

It’s part of the script. Technology will make us happier. We’re only one gadget away from Nirvana. Meanwhile, our families are in shambles. Sales of antidepressants are soaring. People are suffering from all kinds of emotional disorders. The script has failed. The sooner we are aware of this, the better off we will be. If the script has failed us, we need to disengage ourselves from it. And that, my friends, is where Baptism comes in. Baptism is a sign and seal that we desire a new script for our lives, a script written by Jesus himself.

Baptism is a bold counteraction. In Baptism we claim a new sense of values. The purpose of Baptism is to set us free from the script that has failed us. Having this new script in hand offers us new possibilities. So, if someone tempts you with, “Why don’t you stay the night?” You say, “Oh, I couldn’t possibly.” “Why not,” they wonder. “Baptized,” you say. “Ohhh.” You may feel just like giving up on God and religion, like no one cares about you and nothing really makes any difference anyway. “Why do you keep dragging yourself to that church?” someone may ask you. “Baptized!”

Even within the Church, some of us have a tendency to be dismissive of people who are a little slower or obnoxious or more needy than we’d like them to be. We have a tendency to create “in crowds” and “out crowds—those who get care and

attention and those allowed to slip slowly out of the circle. We have a tendency to do these things, but, of course, we won't. Why not? Baptized! This is Baptism as it was meant to be.

Many of us need to ask the question whether our Baptism means anything in our lives. It should be a powerful force in making choices both large and small. It should be a powerful force in reminding us who we are and to whom we belong. It is said that when Martin Luther was despairing, when he seemed to be overwhelmed with the challenges he faced, he would write with his finger in Latin in dust on a table *Baptizatus sum* or *I have been baptized*.

Does this make sense to you? This is a radical understanding of what it means to be baptized and that's the point. Baptism ought to separate us from our old life. It ought to separate us from the decay in society.

If we could get our mind around this understanding of Baptism, it could be revolutionary. We live by a script. The script has failed us. The Gospel gives a counter-script to live by. Baptism is the beginning whereby we have a new script for our lives. Baptism tells us who we are. This is the way we go and this person we follow. God is telling us, Jesus is my Son and he has a new script for you to live by. Will you let him show you the way?

