

December 17, 2023

Title: The Baptist  
John 1:6-8, 19-28

I wanted to welcome Dominic Casaya, that through baptism he has received the promise of eternal life and the power of life with God. [read Romans 6:3]

Today's gospel lesson talks about John the Baptist. Now when John' baptized people, it wasn't quite the same as the baptism we do today. It was the baptism of repentance. Rather, John was a forerunner. He was a herald of the coming of the one who would baptize with power... who would baptize with the power to change people. Now, John was a strange man. He lived out in the desert. He wore clothes made of camel hair, not one of the fancy ones with smooth soft hair, but probably one of raw, camel hide, which was scratchy at best. And he lived off of honey and locusts. Yeah, that John was an odd one alright. But there was something special about John. Jesus said that John the Baptist is the greatest of all prophets: "there is none greater than John" (Mt 11:11a). All previous prophets prepared God's people for the Messiah who was to come but John the Baptist prepared the people for the Messiah WHO WAS THERE. As Jesus approached John pointed to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" (Jn 1:29,36)

Now it important to remember there is really nothing special about John. It was what he symbolized which is important. It was the message that comes through him. Without the message, he was nothing. Take the stained glass windows of our sanctuary for example. They are very beautiful. They are very valuable, tens of thousands of dollars. And yet, their value is not just in their beauty. They are spiritually priceless. Their value comes from what they symbolize. When the light shines through them, a sacred story is shown. without that light shining through them, they are dark, and they do nothing more than keep the cold wind outside. But when the light shines through them, the hidden pictures are illuminated. Pictures which are very beautiful But their power is more than just beautiful pictures, The pictures tell a sacred story. In fact, the windows themselves are sacred because they are part of a holy place. It is part of an altar. It is part of a place where God has promised to meet his people, in Word and sacrament. where God has promised to meet his people, in the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, at Holy communion.

So back to John. John, was just a man, albeit an interesting man, one wearing exotic clothes. But when illuminated with light, when illuminated with the light of Christ, a sacred story is revealed, a story which tells of the fulfillment of prophesy... when God will meet his people, when God will fulfill a promise he made millennia ago. That was John. John, the window, John, the prophet. John, the herald of the coming of the Messiah. John, the herald of Jesus,

who had already come!! So, back to the story.... not just to the story about John, but back to the sacred story, which shown through John.... which illuminated the world with the light of Christ.

So, there is John, at the banks of the river Jordan baptizing people. He has been living apart from society in the arid wilderness camel hair jacket, locust & honey... preaching to anyone who would listen. Now, Wilderness.... deserts.... Jordan river, man in camel hair these have special meaning... Somethings special is being done here. First, the Jordan is sacred. It is here that the prophet Elisha miraculously healed Naaman the commander of the army of Aram by having him bathe in Jordan's waters, (2 Kings 5:14; 6:6). In crossing the Jordan the [Israelites](#) ended their exodus from slavery and entered the promised land. Jordan was a sacred place. And then, there was his clothing and his preaching in the desert. You see His clothing while very odd, and uncomfortable... identified him with someone special. In the first chapter of 2Kings a man has come to prophesy to King Ahaziah of Samaria. The king asked them, "What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?" They replied, "He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist." The king said, "That was **Elijah** the Tishbite." The king knew immediately from his clothing that the person prophesying was Elijah, the Prophet. So, when John the Baptist wears a camel hair and a leather belt, he is identifying himself with the prophet Elijah. All the Jews of Israel would have understood the symbolism of his clothing. Not only that but in his preaching in the desert, they would have understood the purpose of his coming of coming as well. Over 800 years earlier the prophet Isaiah foretold the coming of John. A prophet of the desert preparing the way for the Lord... So, all the Jews in Israel, knew exactly who John was. John was the herald of the long-awaited Messiah. That's the reason why people were flocking FROM the cities to see John the Baptist. Cuz, it meant "the Messiah was coming."

Why was that so important....???? Because, it meant that finally the freedom which they had longed for, for a thousand years... was at hand,... (or so they thought.) You see the light which shown through John, that is, the message which he brought, was not quite the one they expected. You see, when they finally meet up with John, He is preaching "a baptism of repentance." Now many of the Jews did not understand this. "What is this 'repentance' stuff this guy is talking about?" "Where's the military leader we were supposed to get... the one who would free us from the oppression of Rome." You see, for centuries, the Jews had expected a military leader... one who would release them from the bondage to the Romans. What they did not understand was that salvation was not going to be military. Salvation was to be spiritual. and that salvation required repentance.

Okay... got that... But this was a problem. You see... in order to repent you have to admit that you are sinful you have to admit that there was a need for repentance. What's worse is that John was implying that all the works of righteousness that they had done over the years in following the Law of God, meant nothing.... It meant they were still unclean dead in their sins... worthy of condemnation. And this didn't make them happy. When John preached "baptism with repentance for the forgiveness of sins" He wanted people to acknowledge that, apart from God, we were all unclean... all unworthy before God... all sinful... all worthy of condemnation and Hell. And for those willing to admit that... John preached that salvation had come. Salvation from your sinful nature had come. This was the message of spiritual salvation which the new Elijah shared out in the desert. That was the light which shown through John. Repent and be baptized. Repent and be baptized and be saved.

The power of that salvation was not John's. John was just a herald. John was just the pointer.... a pointer to one greater than himself. to one, (as John puts it,) "who's sandals I am not worthy to untie." John was just a window. John's job was to point to the true source of spiritual salvation, John's job was to point to Jesus. Through Jesus, baptism has become more than just a outward sign of repentance. Baptism becomes a thing of power. Baptism becomes a way by which we are tied to Christ. Jesus has added a whole new level of meaning to baptism. In baptism we are tied to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Romans 6:3 says

*Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.*

At our baptism we entered a union with God. In one sense at baptism we were adopted into God's family. Just as in human adoption it changes "who we belong to." We belong to Jesus. We have a new identity.

But the power of baptism is even more than that. In our baptism, not only did "who we belong to" change. but "WE" changed as well. WE were changed by our baptism. It is a thing of power. In Romans it says we "died" at our baptism. Our sinful human self died at our baptism. The sinful part of us, which craved sin, which leads us down the wrong way,... this part of us was put to death at our baptism. Do you know what it means to be dead to sin? Death means separation. "physical death" means separation soul from the body. "spiritual death" means separation soul from God. "death to sin" means our separation from sin.

“Dying to sin” however is not easy. By our own power we would not be able to separate ourselves from sin. Our attachment to sin is like drug addiction. An addict may make a mental commitment to give up drugs, but because they still have traces of the drug in them... because they still have this craving... they may fail and sometimes go back to abusing drugs. Though we may make a commitment to give up a certain sin, in our flesh, in our very being are the traces of sin which cause us to crave sinning. For this reason, without Christ, by our ordinary human nature we are incapable of giving up sin. This is the power of your baptism. It is more than a confession that God has worked faith in you. It is more than being adopted into God’s family. It is death... death to sin. The ways of sin are no longer yours. This is the power of Baptism. Baptism is a guarantee that the ways of sin are no longer yours and more importantly eternal death is no longer yours.

It is precisely because of your baptism, that you have been given power to follow Jesus. And it will be through your baptism your baptism which fundamentally changed you by your death to sin, that you have been given the power to live as a Christian today. This is the power of our baptism. This is the great gift which God has given us. The way of death... the way of sin... is no longer yours. You are a new creation. Now so long as we are in this weak mortal body we will be tempted by Satan, the world, and our very own flesh to return to the old ways. But because of our baptism we now have a choice. We now have a choice to refuse that temptation. We are a new creation. The Holy Spirit is here to empower us to live that new life.

And there is more...!!! Even if we fail against temptation and it causes us to fall., that doesn’t mean we have lost our freedom from our sin. At Confession, we lay down our sins, and God who is faithful and just forgives us and calls us to repent... to return to him. At his Holy Supper, at communion the renewing power of the Holy Spirit to remove the power of sin upon us. As we confess our sins and repent, as we receive the detoxifying power of His holy supper, we receive the power to live our new life.

There are many out there who are confused about the way to salvation. There are many out there, who do not know the power of baptism. As His people, God is calling us to go out, to seek out the lost, and share this wonderful power with them. If you know someone who needs to be changed by God. If you know someone who needs death, death to sin.. If you know someone who needs to be adopted and loved by God Bring them here. Bring them here. Bring them here to experience the God’s transforming power through Baptism. May God provide each of us the opportunity to share his mighty salvation, with others who are dying to meet Jesus. amen