

## Immersed in God

January 11, 2015

**By Anthony Esolen**The Baptism of the Lord  
Readings: Isaiah 42.1-4, 6-7 or 55.1-11;  
Acts 10.34-38 or 1 John 5.1-9;  
Mark 1.7-11

Jesus went to the Jordan along with thousands of others, to be baptized by John. “And when he came up out of the water,” says Saint Mark, “he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased’” (1.10-11).

Let us meditate upon the mystery of this moment.

John was preaching “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mk 1.4), literally for their putting-away, as far as the east is from the west. Only he who creates from nothing by a word can annihilate by a word.

But why should the Son make himself subject to a mere messenger such as John?

That is the same as asking why the Word should be made flesh to dwell among us (Jn 1.14). It is the same as asking why the eternal should be subject to the whirls and eddies of time and history, to something as mundane as a census for taxation, “when Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Lk 2.1). It is the same as asking why the Creator should become “the creature of his creature,” as Dante says, conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary “of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 1:20). Jesus is Emmanuel or God-with-us in a way in which man himself would never submit to be with man. Man rises up to put down; God descends to raise up.

So this is no mere gesture on Jesus’ part. It expresses and enacts his solidarity with us, he the Way of life accompanying us along our way of death. It is the night in the manger, the flight into Egypt, and the carrying of the cross up the mount of Calvary.

## The New Beginning

But there is more. Why, I’ve sometimes asked, does Saint Mark begin his gospel with this incident? The usual answer is that it happens to have begun Jesus’ public ministry. That answer might suffice if the evangelist were a mere chronicler, and if Jesus were a mere man like the rest of us.

Consider the first words of Mark’s gospel: *Arche tou evangeliou Iesou Christou*, the *beginning of the good news of Jesus the Anointed One*. Or those of Saint Matthew: *Biblos geneleos Iesou Christou*, the *book of the genesis of Jesus the Anointed One*. Or those of Saint John: *En arche en ho logos*, *In the beginning was the Word*. The gospels do not conclude with the re-creation of the world. They begin with it. The light of Easter shines upon every word.

For “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (Gen 1.1-2). The earth was *tohu w’bohu*, in the rhyming Hebrew pair. Those words, “waste and empty,” “formless and vain,” are used in scripture together only here and to describe the emptiness of idols – of the gods *that do not exist*.

Out of the darkness of unmeaning, out of the sea of nonbeing, at the voice of God rises the world. Then Adam, the man whom Saint Luke, in his genealogy of Jesus, calls the begotten of God (3.38), attempts to use creation to outwit or overreach the Creator. And sin plunges us into a world of drowning.

That is why the Baptist immersed the penitents in the Jordan. We might say that they took the place of the sinful Jonah, or of the Egyptians with their chariots broken under the waves of the Red Sea. The baptism is a death, as Saint Paul understood: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Rom 6.3)

At the beginning of creation, the Spirit was moving over the deeps, and God said, “Let there be light” (Gen 1.3). Now at the new beginning, Jesus comes forth from the water, and the Spirit descends upon him, like the dove that returned to the ark of Noah, and the heavens open, and God speaks again. “You are my beloved Son,” he says. “With you I am well pleased.”

At the beginning of creation, God saw that the light was good. At this opening of the heavens upon the earth, the Father beholds the Son with love, and declares his delight in him. The light in the beginning was a mere creation, and was good because God made it. The light in the new beginning is the only begotten Son of God, in whom the heart of God himself is pleased.

## God Transforms Us

Now we may be ready to understand the words of the Baptist. He says that he is not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of Jesus’ sandals, and that Jesus will baptize “with the Holy Spirit.” We must not think of the new baptism as somehow merely figurative, a baptism of some inner person, “spiritual” in the weakling sense in which that word is commonly used. This is the same Spirit who moved over the face of the waters, when the physical world was brought into being. The water of the Jordan is figurative; the Spirit brings us a new world, a new nature. “If anyone is in Christ,” says Saint Paul, “he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5.17).

No doubt, Jesus removed his sandals to descend into the river, and perhaps he was as naked to the world then as when he was born in the manger, and as he would be when he was exposed to man’s cruelty upon the cross. Now, John was not worthy to remove those sandals. “Put off your shoes from your feet,” says God to Moses from the burning bush that was not consumed, “for the place on which you are standing is holy” (Ex 3.5). But Jesus himself is the holy one. He is the God born of the virgin, whose virginity was not destroyed. When the priest Aaron would begin the rites of atonement, he had to “bathe his body in water” before putting on the ritual robes (Lev 16.4). But Jesus bathes his body in water so that we might be made clean, and not by water alone, but by the Spirit and the fire of his love.

Do we not see that Saint Mark is giving us a remarkably compressed account of the renewal of the world? For that voice from the newly opened heavens has been foretold. “Behold my servant,” says Isaiah, “whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights” (42.1). This servant is not just one prophet or priest or king among others. His mission harks back to the first making, just as he the savior was begotten of the heart of the Father: “Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread forth the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it” (42.5).

This servant undoes the curse of Babel, which spread confusion and strife to the ends of the earth. He liberates man from the Egypt of his doing: “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (42.6-7).

## God Transforms Us

If we proceed just two more verses in Mark’s gospel, we read of an event which we should not allow editorial divisions and helpful headings to separate from what has come before. The temptation follows the baptism as surely as the serpent slithered for Adam’s loss: “The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him” (Mk 1.12-13).

“Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” scoffed the ungrateful children of Israel, hungering and thirsting in the desert of Sinai (Ps 78.19). The answer to their rhetorical question for us Catholics is that Jesus himself is the manna of heaven and the water from the rock; and those heavenly messengers on the wing stand ready to minister at his sacrifice for us in the Eucharist.

The Baptist hungered for the manifestation of the Messiah, and that is why he advanced boldly into the wilderness, where he made his soul lean and strong on a diet of continual prayer, with locusts and wild honey for the body. But the Messiah comes to delight us with true meat and true drink. The Baptist preached penitence. The Messiah preaches the kingdom. The Baptist heralds the end of the old. The Messiah is the one who is new. The Baptist immersed his disciples in water. The Messiah comes to immerse us in God.

#### *About the Author*

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## FOR FURTHER READING

Benedict XVI, "Homily for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord" (January 7, 2007), available at:  
<http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/b16baptLord07.htm>

Rev. Mr. Sabatino Carnazzo, "Theophany: A Biblical Study on the Baptism of the Lord," audio available at:  
<http://www.instituteofcatholicculture.org/theophany-a-biblical-study-on-the-baptism-of-the-lord/>

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##535-40, 1223-25:

"Feast of the Baptism of the Lord," available at:  
<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/liturgicalyear/calendar/day.cfm?date=2013-01-13>

Rev. Mr. Keith Fournier, "Why Was Jesus Baptized? Living the 'Theophany,' the Baptism of the Lord," Catholic Online (January 9, 2012), available at:  
<http://www.catholic.org/news/hf/faith/story.php?id=44333>

Charles Souvay, "St. John the Baptist," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, available at:  
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08486b.htm>

### IN SHORT . . .

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- ***Jesus is God-with-us in a way in which man himself would never submit to be with man. Man rises up to put down; God descends to raise up.***
- ***Jesus is the Way of life accompanying us along our way of death – through the night in the manger, the flight into Egypt, and the carrying of the cross up the mount of Calvary.***
- ***This servant is not just one prophet or priest or king among others. His mission harks back to the first making, just as he the savior was begotten of the heart of the Father.***
- ***The new baptism is not merely figurative. This is the same Spirit who moved over the face of the waters when the physical world was brought into being.***
- ***The Baptist preached penitence, and the Messiah preaches the kingdom; the Baptist heralds the end of the old, and the Messiah is the one who is new.***