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Remembering whose we are

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Scripture for Life

Most of us celebrate our birthdays. Some among us also celebrate their feast day or patron saint day, but how many of us celebrate the day of our baptism? In his book *Christianity: The Making of Christians* (Kevin Mayhew Ltd., 1979), Mark Searle reminds readers that for many centuries it was the custom in the church to celebrate the *pascha annotinum* or the anniversary of baptism. It was a sort of class reunion for the baptized, their sponsors and the bishop, at which they celebrated the Eucharist together. The opening collect of the Gelasian Sacramentary reflects the significance of this celebration: "O God ... let the solemn occasion which we recall be permanently effective in our lives so that we may remain faithful in practice to what we now commemorate."



The Baptism of the Lord

In remembering our baptism, we remember whose we are and how we are to conduct ourselves so that our true identity as believers inspires and directs all we are and all we do.

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-38

Today, we remember Jesus' baptism, and in our annual celebration of this event, we also recall the mission Jesus accepted on that day. Luke simply, eloquently describes that mission in today's second reading from Acts: "He went about doing good." From the moment he began to teach and preach about the reign of God, Jesus set himself at odds with evil. His actions were not merely acts of mercy but an assault on all that was unholy, "for God was with him," as Luke has attested.

In order to grasp the significance of Jesus' ministry, Christians have traditionally looked to the Isaian servant songs, the first of which constitutes today's first reading. There, the servant is described as one endowed with God's own Spirit in order to bring forth justice for the nations. As Walter Brueggemann has pointed out, the work of justice done by the servant is a deeply conflicted, high-risk matter, but he does not proceed with force or high-handed authority (*Texts for Preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995). God's justice is wrought gently, carefully, lovingly. So also will the servant bring light and healing and freedom to all in need.

The Gospels make it clear that the earliest believers understood Jesus and his ministry in light of the Isaian servant. From the moment of his baptism, when he was endowed by the Spirit and identified as God's Son and Servant (Gospel), Jesus served God's purpose.

Although Deutero-Isaiah probably had someone else in mind (Hezekiah? Jeremiah? the people of Israel?) when these descriptive songs were composed, the *sensus plenior* or "fuller sense" of Scripture enables us to recognize that these songs came to life and found their fulfillment in Jesus.

Brueggemann insists we note that the servant is never named in any of the four servant songs. Therefore, each time we hear these songs proclaimed, we must decide who the servant is. Granted, we see Jesus in this role -- but shouldn't we also see the church as God's servant, establishing justice, being light and healing for all? Shouldn't we also see ourselves as God's anointed servants, filled with the Holy Spirit and equipped with every good gift in order to do God's work? If we were to read each of the songs and insert our own name, how might that clarify who we are to be and what we are to do for God and for others?

As we celebrate Jesus' baptism today and as we remember our own, let us also be renewed in our efforts to uphold God's justice and to be the light in someone else's darkness.

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