

The Feast of the Baptism of our Lord on the First Sunday after the Epiphany
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the Name of God, the source of all life, love, and hope.

Today we are celebrating both the feast of the Epiphany, commemorating the visit of the mysterious foreign Magi to the newborn Jesus, and the feast of the baptism of that same Jesus by his outrageous scruffy cousin John some 30 years later.

In the older Orthodox tradition the day after the 12 days of Christmas is called not *Epiphany* but a related Greek word, *Theophany*, still a revelation, but specifically a revelation of the nature of God.

This is one of the earliest documented celebrations of the church, celebrated long before Christmas (or Epiphany) became a part of the church calendar. [The first annual feast was of course Easter.]

Most priests dislike preaching about the Trinity. I am unusual among my priest friends in loving it. What they hate, the complexity and lack of neatness and clarity, is part of what I love. When I am asked about the concept of the Trinity, I tend to begin by saying, "It means that God is complicated."

This ancient feast of the Theophany, celebrating the revelation of the nature of God, is full of symbols, meanings, and celebrations – it is appropriately complicated. And the focus of this complicated feast is the baptism of Jesus. Orthodox ikons for the feast reveal why this event is considered to be the primary revelation of the nature of God. Jesus, the one through whom all creation happens, goes into the Jordan, the river of Israel's history, and is acknowledged by the voice of God to be the Beloved, the one through whom the relationship between divine and human shines forth, and then the divine Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove. The three faces of God, the three persons of the Trinity, the fundamental complexity of God are revealed in this moment in a way that can be seen, that can be painted. Father, Son, and Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, a trinity of persons in dynamic relationship. Whatever language we put on the complexity of God can here be made visual:

At the top of the ikon we may find angels and clouds, and almost always a pointing hand, all representing God speaking the words, "This is my beloved son, listen to him." Then a dove, the divine Spirit coming down in blessing. Then Jesus going into the water accompanied by John. Father, Son, and Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, the three essential aspects of divinity interact in this moment in a way that humans can perceive it.

And in the midst of this divine complexity, the intimate, loving, unbreakable relationship between God and humanity shines forth. Jesus goes into the Jordan, the river of Israel's difficult history, into the river of human failure and sin, fully identifies with Israel and all humanity, to have all separateness washed away, and all blessing restored. This is a huge moment.

John is understandably confused, because he sees his cousin's holiness and does not understand why he needs to be cleansed, but Jesus shows that in order to welcome humanity into the heart of God, he must identify with us totally, to be with us totally. Stepping into the Jordan, Jesus is stepping into the history of Israel as God's people, with all of their sin and rebellion, and all of their blessedness.

Here at the Jordan is the revelation of the complicated nature of God and of the invincible love of God that can never abandon us.

In his *Journey with Jesus* reflection this week Dan Clendenin writes: "Jesus' baptismal solidarity with broken people was confirmed by God's affirmation and empowerment. Still wet with water after John had plunged him beneath the Jordan River, Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision — the declaration of God the Father that Jesus was his beloved son, and the descent of God the Spirit in the form of a dove. The vision and the voice punctuated the baptismal event... — that by the power of the Spirit, the Son of God embodied his Father's unconditional embrace of all people everywhere." So in this event that we remember today is summed up the trinitarian understanding of God and our invitation into relationship.

We describe ourselves as baptized into Jesus' baptism, proclaiming, that by our baptism we share in Christ's whole saving life and death on our behalf. It is a wondrous and exciting thing to be made part of the Body of Christ.

Whenever we baptize someone, we declare them to be part of the family of God, part of our family. The sign of the cross is made on their forehead with the words that they are 'Marked as Christ's own forever', so that they are forever part of us and we of them.

In baptism we are bound to one another and to God, we are given a job to do and a family with whom to do it. We don't know what will come in our individual or community lives, but we do know that we are committed to one another, to go through the future together.

Whenever we renew our baptismal vows, as we do today, we are reminding ourselves that we are all part of this wonderful family of God – and what that means for our lives. The renewal of vows begins with statements about believing – and the sense of that word 'believe' in these statements is 'entrusting our hearts to'. So, we entrust our hearts to God, who brought us into life in love and calls us to live in love. We do this in Trinitarian form, reflecting the revelation of Theophany. We entrust our hearts to the Father, creator and source of all that is. We entrust our hearts to the Son, the Christ, beloved of the Father, who showed what it means to be truly human and who forged a path for us through death to a whole new kind of life. We entrust our hearts to the Spirit, God holding us in being, sustaining all life.

Then, having reminded ourselves of who holds our hearts, we make promises. We promise to continue to live and worship in community, to learn how to live as Children of God, as part of this loving family, feasting and praying together. We promise to pursue lives of love and service, knowing that we will sometimes fail, but that forgiveness is always available. We promise to be loving servants, to do our part to show forth the love of Christ to the whole world. We promise to live up to Jesus' command to love everyone, as we strive for justice and peace for all. We promise to 'respect the dignity of every human being', aspiring to be conformed to God who loves everyone into being and sustains everyone in being.

It is good that we regularly have the opportunity to renew these vows –reminding ourselves of what it means to be a baptized person, part of the Church, part of Christ's body, the hands and feet and voices of Christ, wherever life may take us.

This re-experiencing of Christ's baptism and its revelations about God and humanity includes the wonderful light of the Epiphany, the star shining forth to lead people from far off lands to find the place where God has come to be with people. This is the last time until Easter when we will use Eucharistic Prayer D with its wonderful line, "you alone are God, living and true, dwelling in light inaccessible from before time and for ever." God is the light that gave birth to creation, who also chooses to be in loving relationship with all of us,

As we contemplate all this, we will bless water remembering all that it means in our relationship with God and I will bless everyone with it, sprinkling it around the church to share the blessing. In some places this blessing of the water extends to blessing nearby rivers and lakes, blessing the waters that sustain life. And an interesting extension of this blessing of water is the annual blessing of houses. Some sources claim that in Orthodox communities the priest goes forth from this service to bless all the houses in the parish. There are few parishes small enough to make that truly possible for a single priest. But the idea of giving thanks for our homes and asking God's blessing on them does make sense, so this week I have a handout which contains a beautiful Celtic house blessing prayer for each of you to take home and pray at your own house. The water of life, the light of Christ, the blessing of God goes with us into each of our homes and is a blessing there.

The Epiphany part of our celebration reminds us of the star those scholars followed from their far off homes to find God come to be with humanity in an obscure town in Israel, and most importantly then went home to tell other peoples and cultures about what they had found. God's relationship with the chosen people is revealed to be a relationship with all people. And so part of our celebration after the service will include a new wrinkle on the highly varied Kings Cake tradition, in which we will all celebrate with cakes full of surprises and hidden meanings to explore – God coming to us in joy. If you happen to receive a crown, that represents not only your acknowledgement of Jesus as King of Kings, but also your calling to share that revelation with the wide world. I am interested to hear what meanings you each find in the various other symbols. There are so many different sets of symbols and meanings that I thought it would be most fun to explore what meanings suggest themselves to us, than to choose one of the traditional sets of meanings.

Let us pray. Gracious, loving, and complex God, let your light so shine in our hearts that we may illumine the dark corners of our world. Amen.

Kings' Cakes at Saint Aidans, Epiphany 2023

Some European cultures developed a variety of traditions involving special cakes in honor of the Magi, the Three Kings. In some of these, especially in Britain and France, these cakes contain special items either baked in or tucked into the cake. Most commonly these cakes are shared on the 12th day of Christmas or on Epiphany itself, but in some places it is shared on Mardi Gras (Shrove Tuesday). We are having our Kings Cake as cupcakes this year and everyone will have a favor (thanks to Jenny). Especially in the British tradition, the favors in the cake speak to what will happen to each person in the coming year. So not only do some people get crowned King (or Queen) for the feast, but some may be predicted to find wealth or get a new job or ... Our cakes have a variety of favors and we are inviting each person to look at their favor and tell the rest of us what you think it means for you in 2023.

Happy Epiphany!

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Happy Epiphany!

Theophany – revelation of the Triune God in Jesus' baptism: all 3 persons together and with us and for us
Light of Christ guiding us and leading us home.

House blessing: God is everywhere with us – inviting God into our homes

Priest going to every house in the parish (!!)

Light of the world, shining for all of us

Day for baptisms, for renewing our baptismal promises, for blessing our homes for another year, for feasting for celebrating

Complicated at trinity is complicated. Sea of symbols to rejoice in. dif ones speak to us at dif times in our lives.

As always we bless by giving thanks, so give thanks for your homes as you carry the epiphany/theophany blessing home with you.

Crowns and kings cake –

The Baptismal Covenant

Celebrant: Let us join with those who are committing themselves to Christ and renew our own baptismal covenant.

Celebrant: Do you believe in God the Father?

People: **I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.**

Celebrant: Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

People: **I believe in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord.**

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again.

He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Celebrant: Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

People: **I believe in the Holy Spirit,**

the holy catholic Church,

the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,

and the life everlasting.

Celebrant: Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

People: **I will, with God's help.**

Celebrant: Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

People: **I will, with God's help.**
Celebrant: Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
People: **I will, with God's help.**
Celebrant: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
People: **I will, with God's help.**
Celebrant: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?
People: **I will, with God's help.**

Segue into prayers

Thanksgiving over the Water:

Celebrant: The Lord be with you.
People: **And also with you.**
Celebrant: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
People: **It is right to give God thanks and praise.**

Celebrant: We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.

We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Now sanctify this water, we pray you, by the power of your holy spirit, that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior.

To him, to you, and to the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and for ever.

People: **Amen.**

Walter Brueggemann (b. 1933) – *probably hand out next week – house blessing prayer this week.*

Epiphany

On Epiphany day,

we are still the people walking.

We are still people in the dark,

and the darkness looms large around us,

beset as we are by fear,

anxiety,

brutality,

violence,

loss —

a dozen alienations that we cannot manage.

We are — we could be — people of your light.

So we pray for the light of your glorious presence

as we wait for your appearing;

we pray for the light of your wondrous grace

as we exhaust our coping capacity;
we pray for your gift of newness that
will override our weariness;
we pray that we may see and know and hear and trust
in your good rule.

That we may have energy, courage, and freedom to enact
your rule through the demands of this day.

We submit our day to you and to your rule, with deep joy and high hope.

For over thirty years now, Walter Brueggemann (b. 1933) has combined the best of critical scholarship with love for the local church in service to the kingdom of God. Now a professor emeritus of Old Testament studies at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, Brueggemann has authored over seventy books. Taken from his *Prayers for a Privileged People* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), p. 163.

Collect of the Day

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting.

Isaiah 42:1-9

A reading from the prophecy of Isaiah

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; 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 the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Psalm 29 Afferte Domino

- 1 Ascribe to the Lord, you gods, *
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
- 2 Ascribe to the Lord the glory that is due the Name; *
worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.
- 3 The voice of the Lord is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders; *
the Lord is upon the mighty waters.

- 4 The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice; *
the voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor.
- 5 The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees; *
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon;
- 6 The LORD makes Lebanon skip like a calf, *
and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.
- 7 The voice of the Lord splits the flames of fire;
the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; *
the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- 8 The voice of the Lord makes the oak trees writhe *
and strips the forests bare.
- 9 And in the temple of the Lord *
all are crying, "Glory!"
- 10 The Lord sits enthroned above the flood; *
the Lord sits enthroned as Sovereign for evermore.
- 11 The Lord shall give strength to the chosen people; *
the Lord shall give the people the blessing of peace.
- [Psalter for the Christian People]*

Acts 10:34-43

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Blessing of the waters

Celebrant: God be with you.

People: **And also with you.**

Celebrant: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People: **It is right to give God thanks and praise.**

Celebrant: We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.

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Now sanctify this water, we pray you, by the power of your holy spirit, that all may be blessed by Christ who invites us all into the baptismal life.

To him, to you, and to the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and for ever.

People: **Amen.**

"Why Do You Come to Me?" The Baptism of Jesus By Dan Clendenin. For Sunday January 8, 2023

The story of Jesus always surprises us if we observe the obvious. When we see and hear what's really happening, it can be very unsettling. The baptism of Jesus, and the stories in Matthew's gospel that lead up to it, are a case in point.

We all have a genealogy, and we all hope that at least some of our ancestors were important people. Documenting our noteworthy forebears is a status booster, however tenuous the connection.

The gospel of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus. Matthew burnishes his credentials by name-dropping Abraham and King David — next to Moses, the two most important people in all of Jewish history. He lists forty-two men in three sets of fourteen generations each. All nice and neat. But then a shock.

Matthew includes five women in Jesus's family tree. Tamar was widowed twice, then became a victim of incest when her father-in-law Judah abused her as a prostitute. Rahab was a foreigner and a prostitute who protected the Hebrew spies by lying. Ruth was a foreigner and a widow. Bathsheba was the object of David's adulterous passion and murderous cover-up. Then, of course, there's Mary the mother of Jesus, who was an unmarried and pregnant teenager. What was Matthew signaling by including these women?

He then describes the birth of Jesus through five disturbing dreams — four by Joseph and one by the pagan *magi*. He contrasts Herod "the king of the Jews" with Jesus "the king of the Jews." You don't need to be a political scientist to know that imperial Rome would have considered that claim an act of political sedition. Two kings over one realm; one of them must be deposed.

And who were the first people to worship the "real" king of the Jews? Another shock — pagan *magi* from the east worship Jesus. Whereas Herod tries to kill Jesus by slaughtering the baby boys of Bethlehem, these foreigners honor Jesus with their gifts.

The historical obscurity of the *magi* has encouraged speculation. Matthew doesn't say that there were three of them. The Greek historian Herodotus (5th century BC) said they were a caste of priests from Persia. Others trace them to the Kurds of two millennia ago, which would be a delicious irony in our contemporary geopolitical context.

By the third century, some people interpreted the *magi* as three kings, a reading which would provoke yet another clash of kingdoms: on the one hand, pagan kings who bow down to the newborn king of the Jews, and, on the other hand, king Herod who tries to murder him.

Still more surprises burst the boundaries of Matthew's most Jewish of all the gospels. Hunted by king Herod, the holy family fled to pagan Egypt where they found asylum. The political ironies in the flight to Egypt are remarkable. The infant Son of God fled as a displaced refugee to a foreign country, Egypt, Israel's sworn and symbolic enemy that had oppressed the Jews for 430 years. The place where Pharaoh had unleashed his own infanticide against the firstborn Israelite children became a refuge for Jesus.

In the end, king Herod died, about 4 BC, not king Jesus. Jesus returned from Egypt and settled in the town of Nazareth in the district of Galilee, a village so insignificant that it's not mentioned in the Old Testament, in the historian Josephus (c. 37–100), or in the Jewish Talmud. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" asked Nathaniel (John 1:46).

Except for Luke's story about the boy Jesus in the temple, these few pages in Matthew are all we know about him before he began his public ministry. The gospels of Mark and John begin with Jesus as an adult. He otherwise disappears into historical obscurity for thirty years. This part of Jesus' life seems to have been so unremarkable and so invisible that it became entirely forgettable. It's counterintuitive in our culture of overexposed "influencers."

Eventually, there emerged a tension between Jesus's filial identity with God the father and his obedience to his earthly parents. That obedience gave way to a radical rupture, for by the time of his public ministry his own family tried to apprehend him, and the entire village of Nazareth tried to kill him as a deranged crackpot (cf. Mark 3:21, Luke 4:29, John 7:5).

That brings us to his baptism — the baptism of a king, who doesn't look or act or sound like any earthly king. After living in anonymity and obscurity for thirty years, Jesus left his family and joined the movement of his eccentric cousin John.

Whereas John's father had been part of the religious establishment as a priest in the Jerusalem temple, John fled the comforts and corruptions of the city for the loneliness of the desert. Living on the margins of society, both literally and figuratively, he preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Contrary to what we might have expected from such an ascetic man and an austere message, the people flocked to John. Even twenty years later in far away Ephesus (1,000 miles by land), people still submitted to the baptism of John (Acts 19:3).

Then another shock — Jesus asks to be baptized by John. This is an explicit role reversal. John had predicted that Jesus would baptize *us* with a figurative "baptism of fire." And now Jesus asks John for a literal baptism by water.

With some important stylistic differences, all four gospels include Jesus' baptism by John: "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"

Why did Jesus the greater submit to baptism "for the forgiveness of sin" by John the lesser? Did he need to repent of his own sins?

The earliest witnesses of his baptism asked this question, because in Matthew's gospel John tried to dissuade Jesus: "Why do you come to me? I need to be baptized by you!" Crossan argues that there was an "acute embarrassment" about Jesus' baptism. Even a hundred years later Jesus' baptism troubled some Christians. In the non-canonical Gospel of the Hebrews (c. 80–150 AD), Jesus denies any need to repent, and seems to get baptized to please his mother.

Jesus' baptism inaugurated his public ministry by identifying with "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem." He identified himself with the faults and failures, the pains and problems, of all the broken people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside us.

Not long into his public mission, the sanctimonious religious leaders derided Jesus as a "friend of gluttons and sinners." They were more right than they knew.

But none of this comes close to the biggest bombshell of the baptismal story — the stupendous claim of a trinitarian confession.

Jesus' baptismal solidarity with broken people was confirmed by God's affirmation and empowerment. Still wet with water after John had plunged him beneath the Jordan River, Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision — the declaration of God the Father that Jesus was his beloved son, and the descent of God the Spirit in the form of a dove.

The vision and the voice punctuated the baptismal event. They signaled the meaning, the message and the mission of Jesus as he went public after thirty years of invisibility — that by the power of the Spirit, the Son of God embodied his Father's unconditional embrace of all people everywhere.

Weekly Prayer

Reginald Heber (1783–1826)

Epiphany

Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness and lend us thine aid;
Star of the East, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.

Cold on His cradle the dewdrops are shining;
Low lies His head with the beasts of the stall;
Angels adore Him in slumber reclining,
Maker and Monarch and Savior of all!

Say, shall we yield Him, in costly devotion,
Odors of Edom and offerings divine?
Gems of the mountain and pearls of the ocean,
Myrrh from the forest, or gold from the mine?

Vainly we offer each ample oblation,
Vainly with gifts would His favor secure;
Richer by far is the heart's adoration,
Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.

The Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, 8 January 2012
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Sometimes our liturgical calendar is a bit confusing. Last Sunday was the Feast of the Holy Name, recalling Jesus' circumcision and naming on the eighth day; Friday was the Feast of the Epiphany commemorating the visit of the Magi to the Holy Child – and today we are celebrating his baptism by John in the Jordan, the beginning of his adult ministry. So we have moved 30 years in just two days!

Christmas is over but we are still celebrating. This wonderful celebration moves us abruptly from Christmas into contemplation of Jesus' ministry. And his ministry, like ours, begins with baptism. When Jesus

comes up out of the water in today's Gospel the Spirit descends upon him and he is proclaimed God's son, the beloved. Just as every baby, child, and adult who is baptized is proclaimed a beloved child of God.

We say that we are baptized into Jesus' baptism, that by our baptism we share in Christ's whole saving life and death on our behalf. It is a wondrous and exciting thing to be made part of the Body of Christ.

When we baptize Connor and Lauren and Nicolas, we will declare them to be part of the family of God, part of our family. Marked as Christ's own forever, they are forever part of us and we of them. In baptism we are bound to one another and to God, we are given a job to do and a family with whom to do it. We don't know what will come in our individual or community lives, but we do know that we are committed to one another, to go through the future together.

Whenever we welcome new people to be baptized, we all renew our baptismal vows, reminding ourselves that we are all part of this wonderful family of God – and what that means for our lives.

The renewal of vows begins with statements about believing – and the sense of that word 'believe' in these statements is 'trust', specifically 'entrusting our hearts to [someone]'. So, we entrust our hearts to God, who brought us into life in love and calls us to live in love. We do this in Trinitarian form, true to the experience of the Church through the millennia. We entrust our hearts to the Father, creator and source of all that is. We entrust our hearts to the Son, the Christ, beloved of the Father, who showed what it means to be truly human and who forged a path for us through death to a whole new kind of life. We entrust our hearts to the Spirit, God holding us in being, sustaining all life.

Then, having reminded ourselves of who holds our hearts, we make promises. We promise to continue to live and worship in community, to learn how to live as Children of God, as part of this loving family, feasting and praying together.

We promise to pursue lives of love and service, knowing that we will sometimes fail, but that forgiveness is always possible.

We promise to be loving servants, to do our part to show forth the love of Christ to the whole world.

We promise to live up to Jesus' command to love everyone, as we strive for justice and peace for all.

We promise to 'respect the dignity of every human being', aspiring to be conformed to God who loves everyone into being and sustains everyone in being.

Then when we welcome the newly baptized we invite them to share with us in Christ's eternal priesthood – that is to join us in blessing the world, the calling of the people of God since the days of Abraham.

It is good that we have the opportunity to renew these vows every year on this feast and on Easter and Pentecost and Saint James and All Saints – that we thus remind ourselves of what it means to be a baptized person, part of the Church, part of Christ's body, the hands and feet and voices of Christ, wherever life may take us.

Two of our regular baptismal services each year, this one and the feast of Saint James in July, also include the adoption of new members. Like most of us, Heather and Bob have already been baptized. They are already part of God's family, of Christ's body serving and blessing the world. So they do not need to be baptized.

But they are being officially adopted by Saint James. This means that they have decided to make this particular community, this local segment of the family of God, their own. They have decided to publicly declare their desire to live as part of our local family, to be part of our life of prayer and service and mutual support. After they make that declaration we promise to include them, to pray for and support them, to embrace them as true member of this church family, concluding by saying, "We welcome you in the Name of Christ and offer you our prayers, our support, and our friendship."

This is a lovely celebration, an opportunity to express our gratitude that we are part of such a loving and joyful community. Because it is a joyful occasion, it usually includes laughter. That is why it seemed appropriate to add to our liturgy the delightful song from *Oliver* that we sing to the newly adopted (as long as the celebrant does not forget!)

This song joined our liturgy last year. I had included the text in the Vestry Retreat and the Vestry had the idea to include it in our adoption liturgies, as it so well expresses the welcoming spirit of Saint James, and what we are meaning to say to those we adopt. It does not matter whether the people being adopted have been coming for a long time before they commit to adoption or move into adoption right away, the sentiment is still the same.

We sing, “Consider yourself at home. Consider yourself one of the family.” This is a wonderful sentiment, similar to the lovely Spanish expression, “Estás en tu casa.” “You are in your own house”, sometimes expressed in the less traditional “Mi casa es tu casa.” Whatever words we use, we are saying, “This is your place now and we are your people.”

We continue singing, “We’ve taken to you so strong. It’s clear - we’re - going to get along.” This of course does not mean that we will never disagree, that there will never be differences of opinion, or even hurt feelings. It does mean that when we disagree we will persevere in relationship. We will not give up on each other.

“Consider yourself well in. Consider yourself part of the furniture.” That is one of my favorite lines – part of the furniture. You belong here. Even if you just come to sit and pray, and it’s one of those days when you don’t even want to speak to anyone else, you still belong. You are now part of Saint James, and Saint James will not be itself without you.

“There isn’t a lot to spare. - Who cares? - What ever we’ve got we share!” That is the essence of community, that sharing, sharing of resources, of friendship, of prayer, of support, of knowledge and exploration – as well as of joy and sorrow, of triumph and tragedy. We declare that our lives are linked, that we will be there with and for one another, whatever happens.

“If it should chance to be - We should see - Some harder days - Empty larder days - Why grouse? - Always a chance we’ll meet - Somebody - To foot the bill - Then the drinks are on the house! - Consider yourself our mate - We don’t want to have no fuss - For after some consideration, we can state... - Consider yourself - One of us!” That is the essence of adoption, “Consider yourself one of us.”

So today we remember that remarkable day two thousand years ago when Jesus went down into the water with his cousin John and came up to be greeted as the Beloved. And as we contemplate that amazing moment, of public declaration of God come among us, we welcome Connor and Lauren and Nicolas into the family of people who share that baptism and that loving relationship with God, and we welcome Bob and Heather into this particular part of that family, bringing God’s love to this corner of God’s creation. This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.

Stepping In By Debie Thomas. For Sunday January 12, 2020

On this first Sunday after the Epiphany, we find ourselves at the edge of the River Jordan with Jesus and his cousin, John. Jesus wants to be baptized, but John is reluctant to heed the Messiah’s request: “*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*” But Jesus insists, receives John’s baptism of repentance, and experiences a moment of divine revelation as he comes up out of the water.

The word “epiphany” comes from the Greek, “epiphaneia,” meaning “appearing” or “revealing.” During this brief liturgical season between Christmas and Lent, we’re invited to leave miraculous births and angel choirs behind, and seek the love, majesty, and power of God in seemingly mundane things. Rivers. Voices. Doves. Clouds. Holy hands covering ours, lowering us into the water of repentance and new life. In the Gospel stories we read during this season, God parts the curtain for brief, shimmering moments, allowing us to look beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our lives, and catch glimpses of the extraordinary. Which is perhaps another way of describing the sacrament of baptism, one of the thin places where the “extraordinary” of God’s grace blesses the ordinary water we stand in.

I was twelve years old when my father baptized me. I remember the day clearly — the June sun reflecting on the water; church members, friends, and extended family gathered around the pool, singing “Nothing But the Blood of Jesus,” my father’s hands covering mine as he lowered me into the water. “*Upon your profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and in obedience to His divine command, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*”

Apparently — I don’t remember this, but it’s family lore — I started asking for baptism when I was barely three years old. “Asking” isn’t the right word, actually; if the rumors are true, I begged, cried, and even threw a few tantrums in my father’s study, *insisting* that I was ready to get dunked.

My father disagreed; he wanted to make sure I understood what I was doing before I participated in a sacred ritual of the Church. (Of course, the irony of his caution is not lost on me now: if there was ever a time when I "understood what I was doing" as a Christian, it was probably at age three. Full of trust, open to love, and wholly captivated by Mystery. I'm sure my adult life has been one long attempt to return to such simple, beautiful comprehension.)

But my father had a point. In the evangelical tradition that raised me, baptism was understood to be a symbolic stepping *out* from the crowd. A *personal* demonstration of faith. "I choose to follow Christ. I choose to identify as a Christian. I choose to make a public declaration — without apology, without shame — of my private beliefs."

Accordingly, the question I had to answer before my father plunged me into the water was a creedal question. A "*Do you personally accept and believe?*" question. It was essential that I understood what I was choosing. After all, my baptism was a symbolic enactment of *my* faith.

I won't argue with this understanding of the sacrament; I still find it meaningful in many ways. But when I read the story of Jesus's baptism in this week's Gospel, I don't so much see a stepping *out*. I see a very intentional stepping *in*. A stepping into a history, a lineage, a geography, an identity. In receiving baptism, Jesus doesn't set himself apart from us; he aligns himself *with* us. Baptism in Matthew's Gospel story is not about Othering. It's about solidarity. About joining.

On the day I was baptized, I had no felt sense that I was giving myself over to something larger, older, wiser, and more capacious than my own one-on-one with Christianity. Baptism, I thought, was all about my effort, my obedience, my responsibility. So much depended on *me!* There were so many ways I could mess up! I had no idea that my "personal decision to love God," important though it is, pales in significance to God's cosmic decision to love me — and the whole of humanity and creation along with me. I didn't know that God was ushering me into a Story — a huge, sprawling Story that began eons before I showed up in my father's study with tiny fistfuls of belief.

In other words, I didn't know the paradoxical power of stepping *in*. Of giving myself over to something deeper and more trustworthy than the shifting sands of my own opinions, creeds, and doctrines: an ancient cloud of witnesses. A worldwide community of the faithful. A liturgy that endures. A created universe that whispers, laughs, and shouts God's name from every nook and corner.

According to Christian historian John Dominic Crossan, Jesus's baptism story was an "acute embarrassment" for the early Church, precisely *because* of this stepping in. Why would God's Messiah place himself under the tutelage of a rabble-rouser like John the Baptist? Why would God's incarnate Son receive a baptism of *repentance*? Repentance for what? Wasn't he perfect? Why on earth would he wade into the murky waters of the Jordan, aligning himself with the great unwashed who teemed into the wilderness, reeking of sin? Worse, why did God the Father choose *that* sordid moment to part the clouds and call his Son beloved? A moment well before all the miracles, the healings, the exorcisms, the resurrections? A moment long before Jesus accomplished a thing worth praising?

Why, indeed? And yet this is the baffling, humbling, awe-inspiring story we've inherited as Christ's followers. Unbelievable though it may seem, Jesus's first public act was an act of stepping *into* his humanity in the fullest, most embodied way. "*Let it be so,*" he told John, echoing the radical consent of his mother, Mary, who raised him in the faith. Let it be so *at the hands of another*, he decided, as he submitted to John the Baptizer, because what Jesus did and still does with power is freely surrender it, share it, give it away. Let it be so *here*, he said, in the Jordan River rich with sacred history. The Jordan where once upon a time his forbears, the ancient Israelites, entered the land of Canaan. The Jordan where the prophet Elijah ended his prophetic ministry, and his successor Elisha inaugurated his. The Jordan which flowed under the same "opened" sky God first opened "in the beginning," at the very dawn of Creation.

In other words, in this one moment, in this one act, Jesus stepped into the whole Story of God's work on earth, and allowed that story to resonate, deepen, and find completion.

So. What part of this story is hardest for you to take in? That God appears by means so unimpressive, so familiar, we often miss him? That Jesus enters joyfully into the full messiness of the human family? That our baptisms bind us to *all* of humanity — not in theory, but in the flesh — such that you and I are kin, responsible for each other in ways we fail too often to honor? That as Christians we are called into radical solidarity, not radical separateness? That we are always and already God's Beloved — not because we've done anything to earn it, but because God's very nature, inclination, and desire is to love?

To embrace Christ's baptism story is to embrace the core truth that we are united, interdependent, connected, one. It is to sit with the staggering reality that we are deeply, *deeply* loved. Can we bear to embrace these mind-bending truths without flinching away in self-consciousness, cynicism, suspicion, or shame?

I'm still coming to terms with the truths of my baptism; I suspect I'll keep doing so for as long as I live. But I don't angst about belief as I used to; I believe and disbelieve a hundred times a day, and yet the efficacy of my baptism holds. That is the point — I am *held*. Not by my own profession of faith, but by the saving power of the One who holds history, holds time, holds earth and sun and wind and sky, and holds me. The One who parts the clouds, blesses the water, and calls me his beloved child.

Baptism — I understand now — is *all about* stepping in, all about surrender, all about finding the holy in the course of my ordinary, mundane life within the family of God. Which means I must *choose* Epiphany. Choose it, and then practice it. The challenge is always before me and before all of us: look again. Look harder. See freshly. Stand in the place that looks utterly ordinary, and regardless of how scared or jaded you feel, cling to the possibility of a surprise that is God. Listen to the ordinary, and know that it is infused with divine mystery. Epiphany is deep water — you can't dip your toes in. You must take a deep breath and plunge. Yes, baptism promises new life, but it always drowns before it resurrects.

What reason for hope, then? What shall we hang onto in this uncertain season of light and shadow? I believe we can hang onto Jesus. He's the one who opens the barrier, and shows us the God we long for. He's the one who stands in line with us at the water's edge, willing to immerse himself in shame, scandal, repentance, and pain — all so that we might hear the only Voice that will tell us *who* we are and *whose* we are in this sacred season. Listen. We are God's chosen. God's children. God's own. Even in the deepest, darkest water, we are the Beloved.

Thin Place, Deep Water By Debie Thomas, For Sunday January 8, 2017

Epiphany. The word comes from the Greek, "epiphaneia," meaning "appearing" or "revealing." During this brief season between Advent and Lent, we leave manger and swaddling clothes behind, and turn to stories of shimmering revelation. Kings and stars. Doves and voices. Water. Wine. Transfiguration.

In Celtic Christianity, Epiphany stories are stories of "thin places," places where the boundary between the mundane and the eternal becomes permeable. God parts the curtain, and we catch glimpses of his love, majesty, and power. Epiphany calls us to look beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our lives, and discover the extraordinary. To look deeply at Jesus, and see God.

The problem? I have never discovered a portentous star in the East. I have never seen the Spirit descend like a dove, or heard a divine Voice in the clouds. I've never watched water become wine, or seen Jesus's clothes blaze white on a mountaintop. Though I have professed belief in a self-revealing God all my life, I have not experienced him in any of the ways the Epiphany stories describe. As St. John puts it, I belong to "a people who walk in darkness."

My experience might be unique, but I doubt it. I don't know many 21st century Christians who bask in signs and wonders, who complain that God talks too much, or butts into their lives too often. But I know plenty of believers who experience God as hidden or silent. These are faithful people who long for epiphany — not just for a season, but for lifetimes.

So I stand at the edges of this week's Gospel reading — Matthew's account of Jesus's baptism — and find myself afraid to leap. How shall I bridge the gap between an ancient Voice and a modern silence? Heaven opened. A dove descended. God spoke. Really? I want to believe this. I *do*.

But to accept the supernatural in Scripture is to plunge into a sea of hard questions. If God spoke audibly in the past, why doesn't he do so now? If he does, why haven't I heard him? Is God angry at me? Has he retreated? Changed? Left?

Or are the ancient stories of Epiphany figurative? Was the dove, in fact, just a dove, and the voice from heaven no more than a nicely timed windstorm? When we speak of epiphanies, are we really just trucking in metaphor? Perhaps God should be in scare quotes. I had a "spiritual experience." I felt "God." He "spoke" to me. Isn't it embarrassing nowadays to believe in miracles?

According to Christian historian John Dominic Crossan, Jesus's baptism story was an "acute embarrassment" for the early Church, too, but for reasons very different from our modern ones. What scandalized the Gospel writers was not the miraculous, but the ordinary. Doves and voices? All well and good — but the Messiah placing himself under the tutelage of a rabble-rouser like John? God's incarnate Son receiving a baptism of *repentance*? Perfect, untouchable Jesus? What was he doing in that murky water, aligning himself with the great unwashed? And why did God the Father choose *that* sordid moment to part the clouds and call his Son beloved?

I suppose every age has its signature difficulties with faith. When we're not busy flattening miracle into mirage, we're busy instead turning sacrament into scandal. After all, what's most incredulous about this story? That the Holy Spirit became a bird? That Jesus threw his reputation aside to get dunked alongside sinners? Or that God looked down at the very start of his Son's ministry and called him Beloved — well before Jesus had accomplished a thing worth praising?

Let me ask the question differently: what do *we* find most impossible to believe for our *own* lives? That God appears by means so familiar, we often miss him? That our baptisms bind us to all of humanity — not in theory, but in the flesh — such that you and I are kin, responsible for each other in ways we fail too often to honor? Or that we are God's Beloved — not because we've done anything to earn it, but because our Father insists on blessing us with his approval?

Here's my real problem with Epiphany: I always, *always* have a choice — and most of the time, I don't want it. I expect God's revelations to bowl me over. I expect the thin places to dominate my landscape, such that I am left choice-less, powerless, sinless. Freed of all doubts, and spilling over with faith.

But no. God has not insulted humanity with so little agency; we get to choose. No matter how many times God shows up in my life, I'm free to ignore him. No matter how often he calls me Beloved, I can choose self-loathing instead. No matter how many times I remember my baptism, I'm free to dredge out of the water the very sludge I first threw in. No matter how often I reaffirm my vow to seek and serve Christ in all persons, I'm at liberty to reject you and walk away.

The stories of Epiphany are stories of light, and yet quite often, they end in shadow. The Visitation of the Magi leads to the Slaughter of the Innocents. Jesus's baptism drives him directly into the wilderness of temptation and testing. Soon after he's transfigured, he dies. There is no indication, anywhere in Scripture, that revelation leads to happily ever afters. It is quite possible to stand in the hot white center of a thin place, and see nothing but my own ego.

Yet we speak so glibly of faith, revelation, and baptism. As if it's all easy. As if what matters most is whether we sprinkle or immerse, dunk babies or adults. As if lives aren't on the line. Until Christianity became a state-sanctioned religion in the 4th century A.D, no convert received the sacrament of baptism lightly; he knew the stakes too well. To align oneself publicly with a despised and illegal religion was to court presecution, torture, and death.

I don't know about you, but I find so much of this maddening. How much nicer it would be if the font were self-evidently holy. But no — the font is just tap water, river water, chlorine. The thin place is a neighborhood, a forest, a hilltop. The voice that might be God might also be wind, thunder, indigestion, or delusion. Is the baby divine? Or have we misread the star? Is this the body and blood of God's Son? Or is it a mere hunk of bread? A jug of wine?

What I mean to say is that there is no magic — we *practice* Epiphany. The challenge is always before us. Look again. Look harder. See freshly. Stand in the place that might possibly be thin, and regardless of how jaded you feel, cling to the possibility of surprise. Epiphany is deep water — you can't stand on the shore and dip your toes in. You must take a breath and plunge. Yes, baptism promises new life, but it always kills before it resurrects.

What reason for hope, then? What shall we hang onto in this uncertain season of light and shadow? New Testament scholar Marcus Borg suggests that Jesus himself is our thin place. He's the one who opens the barrier, and shows us the God we long for. He's the one who stands in line with us at the water's edge, willing to immerse himself in shame, scandal, repentance, and pain — all so that we might hear the only Voice that can tell us *who* we are and *whose* we are in this sacred season. Listen. We are God's own. God's children. God's pleasure. Even in the deepest water, we are Beloved.

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A Shocking Request & a Stupendous Claim: The Baptism of Jesus by Dan Clendenin **For January 12, 2014**

The story of Jesus always surprises us if we observe the obvious. And when we see and hear what's really happening, it can be very unsettling. The baptism of Jesus, and the stories in Matthew's gospel that lead up to it, are a case in point.

Every person has a genealogy, and we all hope that some of our ancestors were important people. Documenting our noteworthy forebears is a status booster, however tenuous the connection.

The gospel of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus. Matthew burnishes his credentials by name-dropping Abraham and King David — next to Moses, the two most important people in all of Jewish history. His genealogy lists forty-two men in three sets of fourteen generations each. All nice and neat. Then comes a shock.

Matthew includes five sexually suspicious women in Jesus's family tree. Tamar was widowed twice, then became a victim of incest when her father-in-law Judah abused her as a prostitute (Genesis 38). Rahab was a foreigner and a prostitute who protected the Hebrew spies by lying. Ruth was a foreigner and a widow. Bathsheba was the object of David's adulterous passion and murderous cover-up. Then, of course, there's Mary the mother of Jesus, who was unmarried and pregnant.

Matthew then describes the birth of Jesus through five disturbing dreams. He contrasts Herod "the king of the Jews" with Jesus, whom he also calls "the king of the Jews." You don't need to be a political scientist to know that imperial Rome would have considered that claim an act of political sedition.

And who were the first people to worship the "real" king of the Jews? Another shock — pagan magi from the east worship Jesus, whereas Herod tries to kill Jesus by slaughtering the baby boys of Bethlehem.

The historical obscurity of the magi has encouraged speculation. Matthew doesn't say that there were three of them. The Greek historian Herodotus (5th century BC) said they were a caste of priests from Persia. Others trace them to the Kurds of two millennia ago, which would be a delicious irony in our contemporary geo-political context.

By the third century, some people interpreted the magi as three kings, a reading which would provoke another clash of kingdoms: on the one hand, pagan kings who bow down to the newborn king of the Jews, and, on the other hand, king Herod who tries to murder him.

Still more surprises burst the boundaries of this most Jewish of all the gospels. The young family of Jesus escapes to pagan Egypt, the sworn and symbolic enemy of Israel, the iconic place of 430 years of bondage. It's in Egypt that they find refuge and protection.

In the end, king Herod died, about 4 BC, not king Jesus. Jesus returned and settled in the town of Nazareth in the district of Galilee, a village so insignificant that it's not mentioned in the Old Testament, in the historian Josephus (c. 37–100), or in the Jewish Talmud. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" asked Nathaniel (John 1:46).

Except for Luke's story about the boy Jesus in the temple, these four pages in Matthew are all we know about him before he began his public ministry. He otherwise remains shrouded in historical obscurity for almost thirty years. This part of Jesus's life seems to have been so ordinary and so invisible that it became entirely forgettable.

Eventually, though, there emerged a tension between Jesus's filial identity with God the father and his obedience to his earthly parents. That obedience gave way to a radical rupture, for by the time of his public ministry his own family tried to apprehend him and the entire village of Nazareth tried to kill him as a deranged crackpot (cf. Mark 3:21, Luke 4:29, John 7:5).

That brings us to his baptism. After living in anonymity and obscurity for thirty years, Jesus left his family and joined the movement of his eccentric cousin John.

Whereas John's father had been part of the religious establishment as a priest in the Jerusalem temple, John fled the comforts and corruptions of the city for the loneliness of the desert. Living on the margins of society, both literally and figuratively, he preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Contrary to what you might have expected from such an ascetic man and an austere message, the people flocked to John. Even twenty years later in far away Ephesus (1,000 miles by land), people still submitted to the baptism of John (Acts 19:3).

Then another shock — Jesus asks to be baptized by John. This is an explicit role reversal. John had predicted that Jesus would baptize us with a figurative "baptism of fire." And now Jesus asks John for a literal baptism by water.

With some important stylistic differences, all four gospels include Jesus's baptism by John: "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"

Why did Jesus the greater submit to baptism "for the forgiveness of sin" by John the lesser? Did he need to repent of his own sins?

The earliest witnesses of his baptism asked this question, because in Matthew's gospel John tried to dissuade Jesus: "Why do you come to me? I need to be baptized by you!" Crossan argues that there was an "acute embarrassment" about Jesus's baptism. Even a hundred years later Jesus's baptism troubled some Christians. In the non-canonical Gospel of the Hebrews (c. 80–150 AD), Jesus denies any need to repent, and seems to get baptized to please his mother.

Jesus's baptism inaugurated his public ministry by identifying with "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem." He identified himself with the faults and failures, the pains and problems, of all the broken people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside us.

Not long into his public mission, the sanctimonious religious leaders derided Jesus as a "friend of gluttons and sinners." They were right about that.

But none of this comes close to the biggest bombshell of the baptismal story — the stupendous claim of a trinitarian confession.

Jesus's baptismal solidarity with broken people was confirmed by God's affirmation and empowerment. Still wet with water after John had plunged him beneath the Jordan River, Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision — the declaration of God the Father that Jesus was his beloved son, and the descent of God the Spirit in the form of a dove.

The vision and the voice punctuated the baptismal event. They signaled the meaning, the message and the mission of Jesus as he went public after thirty years of invisibility — that by the power of the Spirit, the Son of God embodied his Father's unconditional love of all people everywhere.

An "Acute Embarrassment"? The Baptism of Jesus For Sunday January 9, 2011

After living in total obscurity his entire life, in his late twenties Jesus left his family in Nazareth and joined the movement of his eccentric cousin John. Jesus might have even submitted himself to John as a disciple to a mentor. Some scholars think that John was part of the apocalyptic Jewish sect of Essenes who opposed the temple in Jerusalem. At least this much is clear — John the Baptizer was a prophet of radical dissent, so much so that his detractors said that he had a demon (Luke 7:33).

Whereas John's father had been part of the religious establishment as a priest in the Jerusalem temple, John fled the comforts and corruptions of the city for the loneliness of the desert. There he dressed in animal skins, ate insects and wild honey, preached, and baptized. Living on the margins of society, both literally and figuratively, he preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4).

Borg characterizes John's message as an announcement of both "indictment and invitation." Contrary to what you might have expected from such an ascetic man with an austere message, the gospels say that people flocked to John. Even twenty years later in far away Ephesus (1,000 miles by land or 600 miles by sea), people submitted to the baptism of John (Acts 19:3).

John's preaching in the Judean desert and baptizing in the Jordan river confronted both the religious and the political powers of his day. About six months after John emerged from the desert like some scraggly lunatic and baptized Jesus, he was beheaded at the whim of Herod the tetrarch, who at a dinner party capitulated to the sadistic demand of his girlfriend's daughter. John was the forerunner of Jesus, but he was also a forth-teller to Herod, having rebuked Herod for sleeping with his brother's wife (Mark 6:14–29). But as with many perverse politicians, Herod had his way with him who had spoken truth to power, so John was murdered.

The temple establishment in Jerusalem, which exercised a gate-keeper monopoly on mediating God's grace to people, didn't like him preaching from the periphery either. John castigated these religious authorities as a "brood of vipers" (in one translation, "snake bastards"). The religious experts, said Jesus, spurned John's call to baptismal repentance, and in so doing "rejected God's purpose for themselves" (Luke 7:30).

The prophetic word of God from John the Baptist, then, did not originate with the state powers or the religious establishment, nor did it find a receptive audience with them. Instead of cooperation, accommodation, or resignation, John challenged these religious and political powers with his anti-establishment message of "protest and renewal." By joining John the Baptizer's fringe movement, Jesus did likewise (Borg).

Then comes a shock — Jesus himself asks to be baptized by John. With some important stylistic differences, all four gospels tell the story of Jesus's baptism by John: "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased'" (Luke 3:21–22 = Mark 1:9–11 = Matthew 3:13–17; John 1:29–34).

After his radical rupture with his family and conventional society by identifying with the desert troublemaker, to the point of submitting to his baptism, Jesus's own family tried to apprehend him. The village of Nazareth tried to kill him as a deranged crackpot (cf. Mark 3:21, Luke 4:29, John 7:5).

Why did Jesus the greater submit to baptism "for the forgiveness of sin" by John the lesser? Did he need to repent of his own sins? The earliest witnesses of his baptism asked this question, because in Matthew's gospel John the Baptizer tried to deter Jesus: "Why do you come to me? I need to be baptized by you!" In other words, John insists that Jesus was not getting baptized for his own sins. Crossan argues that there was an "acute embarrassment" about Jesus's baptism on the part of the gospel writers.

Even a hundred years after the event, Jesus's baptism made some Christians feel uneasy. In the non-canonical Gospel of the Hebrews (c. 80–150 AD), Jesus denies that he needs to repent. He seems to get baptized to please his mother: "The mother of the Lord and his brothers said to him, 'John the Baptist baptizes for the forgiveness of sins; let us go and be baptized by him.' But he said to them, 'In what way have I sinned that I should go and be baptized by him? Unless, perhaps, what I have just said is a sin of ignorance.'" Others have suggested that Jesus set an example for us, that just as he was baptized, we too should be baptized.

We get some clues to this question if we back track to the beginning of Matthew. On page one of his gospel Matthew lists forty-two men in Jesus's genealogy, then four women with unsavory pasts. *Tamar* was widowed twice, then became a victim of incest when her father-in-law Judah abused her as a prostitute (Genesis 38). *Rahab* was a foreigner and a whore who protected the Hebrew spies by lying. *Ruth* was a foreigner and a widow, while *Bathsheba* was the object of David's adulterous passion and murderous cover-up (Matthew 1:1–17). These four women were forbears of Jesus.

On page two, Matthew describes the birth of Jesus through five disturbing dreams. He pits Herod "the king of the Jews" against Jesus "the king of the Jews." The pagan *magi* worship Jesus, whereas Herod tries to kill Jesus by slaughtering the baby boys of Bethlehem. Jesus escapes to Egypt, the sworn and symbolic enemy of Israel, and finds refuge there.

Jesus's baptism inaugurated his public ministry by identifying with "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem." He allied himself with the faults and failures, the pains and problems, of all the broken people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside us and among us. Not long into his public mission, the sanctimonious religious leaders derided Jesus as a "friend of gluttons and sinners." They were right about that.

With his baptism, Jesus openly and decisively stands with me in my fears and anxieties. He intentionally took sides with people in their neediness, and declared that God was biased in their favor: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:15–16, NIV). God's abundant mercy, Jesus declared, is available directly and immediately to every person; it's not the private preserve doled out by the temple establishment in Jerusalem.

Jesus's baptismal solidarity with broken people was vividly confirmed by God's affirmation and empowerment. Still wet with water after his cousin had plunged him beneath the Jordan River, Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision — the declaration of God the Father that Jesus was his beloved son, and the descent of God the Spirit in the form of a dove. The vision and the voice punctuated the baptismal event. They signaled the meaning, the message and the mission of Jesus as he went public after thirty years of invisibility — that by the power of the Spirit, the Son of God embodied his Father's unconditional embrace of all people everywhere.

Wading Into the Waters: The Baptism of Jesus For Sunday January 13, 2008

In *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), a film directed by Martin Scorsese and based upon the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, we watch a very human Jesus. He confesses his sins, he fears insanity, he wonders if he's merely a man, and he anguishes over the people he didn't heal.

In his "last temptation," during his execution Jesus has a hallucination sent by Satan. He imagines what his life might have been like if he had chosen the path of an ordinary man. He imagines himself marrying Mary Magdalene, growing old, and having kids. But then he sees the disciples reproaching him for abandoning his special mission, and through their reproach he returns to consciousness to accomplish his final suffering, death, and resurrection.

Many Christians were outraged by Scorsese's film and considered it blasphemous. Blockbuster Video even refused to carry it. What seemed to bother many Christians was the suggestion that Jesus was fully and truly human, that he was a person who experienced trials and temptations, faults and failures, just like we do — torment, doubt, loneliness, questions, fantasies, confusion, despair, erotic dreams, and, in his final hours, feeling abandoned by God Himself.

With his baptism Jesus fully identified with fallen humanity. Matthew has already tipped his hand in this regard. On page one of his gospel he lists forty-two men in Jesus's genealogy, then four women with unsavory pasts. *Tamar* was widowed twice, then became a victim of incest when her father-in-law abused her as a prostitute (Genesis 38). *Rahab* was a foreigner and a whore who protected the Hebrew spies by lying. *Ruth* was a foreigner and a widow, while *Bathsheba* was the object of David's adulterous passion and murderous cover-up (Matthew 1:1–17). These women stick out like a sore thumb; but they nevertheless formed part of Jesus's family of origin.

On page two, Matthew then honors the pagan *magi* from Persia who worshipped Jesus with their gifts. Page three brings us to his baptism. To air brush this fully human Jesus is to fall prey to something like the second-century heresy of docetism (from the Greek *dokeo*, "to seem or appear") that claimed Jesus only "seemed" human. Surely he couldn't have been polluted by our material existence! In trying to "protect" Jesus from a genuine human nature, we do the exact opposite of what he himself does in his baptism; instead of insulating himself from us, he fully participates with us.

After living in total obscurity his entire life, in his late twenties Jesus left his family in Nazareth and burst onto the public scene by joining the movement of his eccentric cousin, John the Baptizer. Perhaps Jesus submitted himself to John as a disciple to a mentor. John might have been part of the apocalyptic Jewish sect of Essenes who opposed the temple in Jerusalem. By any measure, John the Baptizer was a prophet of radical dissent; his detractors had good reasons to say that he acted like he had a demon (Luke 7:33).

Whereas his father was a priest in the Jerusalem temple, John fled the comforts and corruptions of the city for the loneliness of the desert. There he dressed in animal skins and ate insects and wild honey. Living on the margins of society, both literally and figuratively, he preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, which is to say that he announced a message of both indictment and invitation: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" Later, Jesus repeated John's exact words to announce his own public ministry (Mark 1:15). Contrary to what we might have expected from such an ascetic man with an austere message, the Gospels say that people flocked to John.

John's preaching in the Judean desert and baptizing in the Jordan river confronted both the religious and the political powers of his day. Imperial Rome beheaded him when John rebuked Herod for sleeping with his brother's wife (Matthew 14:1–12). The temple establishment in Jerusalem, which claimed a gate-keeper monopoly on mediating God's forgiveness to people, didn't like him preaching from the periphery either. John castigated these religious authorities as a "brood of vipers" (in one translation, "snake bastards"). The religious experts, said Jesus, spurned John's call to baptismal repentance, and in so doing "rejected God's purpose for themselves" (Luke 7:30).

Instead of cooperation, accommodation, or resignation, John challenged these religious and political powers with his anti-establishment message of "protest and renewal." By joining John the Baptizer's fringe movement, Jesus did likewise.

With some important stylistic differences, all four Gospels tell the story of Jesus's baptism by John: "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased'" (Luke 3:21–22 = Mark 1:9–11 = Matthew 3:13–17; John 1:29–34).

No wonder that after this radical rupture with his family and conventional society by identifying with the desert troublemaker, eventually Jesus's own family tried to apprehend him. The village of Nazareth tried to kill him as a deranged crackpot (cf. Mark 3:21, Luke 4:29, John 7:5).

Why did Jesus the greater submit to baptism by John the lesser? Did he need to repent of his own sins? The earliest witnesses of his baptism asked this question, because in Matthew's Gospel John the Baptizer tried to deter Jesus: "Why do you come to me? I need to be baptized by you!" John insinuates that Jesus was not getting baptized for his own sins.

But even a hundred years later Jesus's baptism made some Christians feel uneasy. In the non-canonical Gospel of the Hebrews (c. 80–150 AD), for example, Jesus denies that he needs to repent. He seems to get baptized to please his mother: "The mother of the Lord and his brothers said to him, 'John the Baptist baptizes for the forgiveness of sins; let us go and be baptized by him.' But he said to them, 'In what way have I sinned that I should go and be baptized by him? Unless, perhaps, what I have just said is a sin of ignorance.'" Others have suggested that Jesus set an example for us, that just as he was baptized, we too should be baptized.

Jesus's baptism inaugurated his public ministry by identifying with what Luke describes as "all the people." He allied himself with the faults and failures, pains and problems, of all the broken and hurting people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside us and among us. Not long into his public mission, the sanctimonious religious leaders derided Jesus as a "friend of gluttons and sinners." They were surely right about that.

With his baptism Jesus openly and decisively declared that he stands shoulder to shoulder with me in my fears and anxieties. He intentionally takes sides with people in their neediness, and declares that God is biased in their favor: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:15–16, NIV). God's abundant mercy, Jesus declared, is available directly and immediately to every person; it's not the private preserve doled out by the temple establishment in Jerusalem.

Jesus's baptismal solidarity with broken people was vividly confirmed by divine affirmation and empowerment. Still wet with water after his cousin had plunged him beneath the Jordan River, Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision—the declaration of God the Father that Jesus was his beloved son, and the descent of God the Spirit in the form of a dove. The vision and the voice punctuated the baptismal event. They signaled the meaning, the message and the mission of Jesus as he went public after thirty years of invisibility — that by the power of the Spirit, the Son of God embodied his Father's unconditional acceptance of all people without exception.

The Voice of the Lord For Sunday January 9, 2005 First Sunday After Epiphany

My friend Bill recently emailed me to ask for some book recommendations. He wanted to pass on my suggestions to a former student who had nearly lost her faith, were it not for a handful of books that parsed the Christian faith in ways that resonated with her. One book in particular spoke to her so deeply that she lamented, "if I had read this book in college I would not have spent twelve years trying to be an atheist."

Catholic piety centers on the sacraments, and the Eastern Orthodox privilege icons and images, whereas Protestantism is a quintessentially book tradition. The Reformation of the 16th-century that convulsed Europe spawned a text-oriented faith that denigrated images and deemphasized the sacraments (whittling Catholicism's seven sacraments down to two). A new piety arose in which reading usurped rituals and relics. In the early years of the Reformation, Protestant extremists smashed sculptures, defaced images, and whitewashed the frescoes of churches. "Images," sniffed the Genevan Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564), "cannot stand in the place of books." The sermon upstaged the eucharist as the defining moment of the liturgy; it was spoken from an elevated pulpit, in street vernacular, and directed to a person's intellect, instead of ritual formulas intoned in Latin which no one understood. Before too long, pastors like Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) in Zurich and Martin Luther (1483–1546) in Wittenberg, Germany, preached their sermons wearing a radical change of dress, the scholar's gown as opposed to a monk's cowl, symbolizing this centrality of books, words, scholarship and ideas.

The invention of movable type, along with the production of paper from rags instead of animal skins or reed-based parchment, was the engine that drove the Reformation. Together, they made book production cheaper, easier, and profitable. According to the English Puritan John Foxe (1516–1587), "God conducted the Reformation not by the sword, but by printing, writing, and reading." On the title page of his book *Acts and Monuments* (1563), later nicknamed *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, Foxe depicted two congregations at worship—Catholics fingering their rosaries, and Protestants reading books in their laps.

Luther, whose collected works run to some 60 volumes, epitomized this love affair with texts, books, and words. Between 1517 and 1520 his pamphlets sold over 300,000 copies. His phenomenal capacity to write met the voracious appetite and enthusiasm of a newly literate reading public. "There were 390 editions of various of Luther's writings published in Germany in 1523 alone," writes Diarmaid MacCulloch in his magisterial book *The Reformation* (2003), "and it has been calculated that beyond what he himself had written, around three million copies of related pamphlets (*Flugschriften*, or fly sheets, mostly illustrated) were printed in German by 1525...Print could take the Reformation to anyone who was prepared to hear a pamphlet being read out...It was a time of what the German historian Franz Lau has called *Wildwuchs*: wildfire growth, as in a jungle or an abandoned garden."

In books, pamphlets and tracts the early Protestants encountered what MacCulloch describes as "the explosive power of an idea" (namely, a restatement of St. Augustine's ideas about salvation). "Monarchs, priests, nuns, merchants, farmers, laborers were seized by ideas that tore through their experiences and memories and made them behave in new ways, sometimes admirable, sometimes monstrous." Protestants then and now discover what the Psalmist for this week describes as "the voice of the Lord." Sometimes this "voice of the Lord," the Psalmist writes, "thunders, breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon, strikes with flashes of lightning, shakes the desert, twists the oaks, and strips the forests bare" (Psalm 29). At other times "the voice of the Lord" we discover in books speaks softly and gently to encourage us.

With gratitude to those first reading Protestants, here are ten books that I read the last year in which I encountered the bark-stripping power of ideas and the tender voice of the Lord. I offer them for your own reading list in 2005.

Craig Barnes, *Searching for Home; Spirituality for Restless Souls* (2003): The former pastor of National Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC, elucidates the Christian pilgrimage in terms of journeying toward home. Each chapter begins with a short quote from Dante's *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, or *Paradise*, and then proceeds with Barnes's theological and pastoral reflections, including his own Christian journey. Barnes does a fine job at avoiding clichés, taking the measure of contemporary culture, including a broad diversity of popular and scholarly sources, and drawing upon a fund of insights from pastoral counseling. The book moves us through the stages of Christian journey, from our profound lostness, to awakening, repentance, confession, faith, community, guidance, and sacrament. The truly good news of Jesus, writes Barnes, is that "all of the roads belong to God," and that "the Savior can use any road to bring us home." Quoting CS Lewis, he reminds us that God can even use the wrong roads to take us to the right places.

Greg Behrman, *The Invisible People; How the US Has Slept Through the Global AIDS Pandemic, the Greatest Humanitarian Catastrophe of Our Time* (2004): With 20 million already dead, 8,000 deaths every new day, and, the experts warn, worse yet to come, Behrman traces the history of the epidemic, responses to it, and how HIV/AIDS is a moral crisis, a humanitarian disaster, and even an issue of national security.

Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (2004): How one single individual, from a highly improbable birth and background, shaped our entire nation's history. Chernow's magisterial biography commemorates the 200th anniversary of the death of Hamilton (1755–1804), who was killed in a duel by then vice president Aaron Burr. Because of the savage politics and pathological enmity between Hamilton and his detractors (Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and Monroe), his reputation has suffered neglect, when in fact he might have been the most important architect of our post-Revolutionary American experiment.

Joan Chittister, *Called to Question; A Spiritual Memoir* (2004): The Benedictine nun and author of 25 books names the fear of asking questions and being wrong for the unfortunate trait that it is. This is the third book by her that I have read, and I have come to appreciate her spirit and gift to do what good writers do, which is to connect with the every day experiences and aspirations of readers. Using her own spiritual journal entries from across a four year period, she pushes, pokes and prods at the various dimensions of Christian living.

Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom; The Coming of Global Christianity* (2002): A little over twenty years ago David Barrett published his book *World Christian Encyclopedia* (1982; 2002) that documented a growing change in Christianity's center of gravity. After flourishing around the Mediterranean perimeter, Christianity was overtaken by Islam by the eighth or ninth century. For the next millennium, Christianity migrated to Europe. Now, with Jenkins's new book, we can say with confidence that yet another massive shift has occurred in Christianity, away from the wealthy and primarily white regions of the northern hemisphere, to the poor and non-white regions of the southern hemisphere.

Martin Marty, *Martin Luther* (2004): An accessible and eminently readable biography that takes its guiding theme from Luther's lifelong struggle with God: "God present and God absent, God too near and God too far, the God of wrath and the God of love, God weak and God almighty, God real and God as illusion, God hidden and God revealed." The German word upon which Marty fastens this theme is *Anfechtungen*, a word that is hard to translate but easy for people to appreciate: "the spiritual assaults that Luther said kept people from finding certainty in a loving God."

Donald McCullough, *The Consolations of Imperfection; Learning to Appreciate Life's Limitations* (2004): A former pastor and seminary president who lost his marriage and his job explores the breadth and depth of life's limits. Each chapter treats a specific limit, and then shows how and why it might be construed as a blessing: the limitations of the body, relationships, knowledge, achievement, moral goodness, spirituality, romance, sex, confidence, public approval, money, competitiveness, control, freedom, pleasure, the senses, time and optimism.

Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (2004): The subtitle explains the entire book, "Why I am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical + charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist/calvinist + anabaptist/anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished CHRISTIAN."

Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God; The Classic Account of Mother Teresa's Journey Into Compassion* (1971): Late in his adult life the renowned agnostic Muggeridge converted to Christianity through the influence of Mother Teresa (1910–1997). In 1959 he interviewed Mother Teresa, and then ten years later made a television documentary of her life for the BBC. To honor her beatification in October 2003, Harper reissued the book version of these two efforts as a short, popular biography.

David Shipler, *The Working Poor; Invisible in America* (2004): Pulitzer Prize winner Shipler has written a passionate book about the poor. One measure of a society, and certainly of Christianity, is its care for the weak, the vulnerable and the poor. Shipler focuses on a special sort of poor, not the destitute but what he calls the "working poor." These are the people we pass every day who make our American way of life

possible. They clean our office buildings at night, serve us at restaurants, repair our cars, sew our designer garments, and handpick our fresh produce. Two other favorite books by Shipler include *Arab and Jew*; *Wounded Spirits in a Promise Land* and *A Country of Strangers*; *Blacks and Whites in America*.

Lewis B. Smedes, *My God and I: A Spiritual Memoir* (2003): Smedes, long time and much loved professor of Fuller Theological Seminary, finished this short memoir just before his untimely death on December 19, 2002, at the age of 81. Thank God he did. In twenty-seven short, crisp chapters (about 7–8 pages each), Smedes takes us through the successive stages of his life journey, beginning with his grandparents and ending with his retirement years. Smedes struggled with faith. He reminds me of the wag who observed, “my faith does not seem to be very strong, but it appears to be permanent.”

Make that eleven. May you too hear the voice of the Lord from the printed page, whether a thunder that splits the oaks or the tender whisper of encouragement.

Theophany



The Baptism of Christ

Theophany (from Greek *theophania*, meaning "appearance of God") is one of the Great Feasts of the Orthodox Church, celebrated on January 6. It is the feast which reveals the Most Holy Trinity to the world through the Baptism of the Lord (Mt.3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22).

Baptism of Christ

This observance commemorates Christ's baptism by John the Forerunner in the River Jordan, and the beginning of Christ's earthly ministry. The Feast of Theophany is the culmination of the Christmas Season, which starts on December 25 and ends on January 6. In mystic commemoration of this event, the Great Blessing of Water is performed on this day, and the holy water so blessed is used by the local priest to bless the homes of the faithful.

The feast is called *Theophany* because at the baptism of Christ the Holy Trinity appeared clearly to mankind for the first time—the Father's voice is heard from Heaven, the Son of God is incarnate and standing physically in the Jordan, and the Holy Spirit descends on Him in the form of a dove.

This feast is also sometimes referred to as *Epiphany* by English-speaking Orthodox Christians, but that name more properly refers to the Western Christian feast falling on that same day and commemorating the visit of the Magi to the child Jesus. The term *epiphany* does appear in some of the service texts for this feast, however.

Originally, there was just one Christian feast of the shining forth of God to the world in the human form of Jesus of Nazareth. It included the celebration of Christ's birth, the adoration of the wise men, and all of the childhood events of Christ such as his circumcision and presentation to the temple as well as his baptism by John in the Jordan. There seems to be little doubt that this feast, like Pascha and Pentecost, was understood as the fulfillment of a previous Jewish festival, in this case the Feast of Lights. The Armenian Apostolic Church still keeps January 6 as a feast of both Christ's Nativity and baptism.

Celebration of the feast [orthodox wiki]

The Baptism of Christ (*Menologion of Basil II, 10th-11th c.*)

The services of Theophany are arranged similarly to those of the Nativity. (Historically the Christmas services were established later.)

The Royal Hours are read and the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great is served with Vespers on the eve of the feast. The Vigil is made up of Great Compline and Matins. On the morning of the feast, the Divine Liturgy is served.

The Liturgy of the feast begins with psalms of glorification and praise instead of the three normal Antiphons. And the baptismal line from Galatians 3:27 replaces the Thrice-Holy.

For as many as been baptized into Christ have put on Christ: Alleluia.

The Gospel readings of all the services tell of the Lord's baptism by John in the Jordan River. The epistle reading of the Divine Liturgy tells of the consequences of the Lord's appearing which is the divine epiphany.

Since the main feature of the feast is the blessing of water. It is prescribed to follow both the Divine Liturgy of the eve of the feast and the Divine Liturgy of the day itself. But most local parishes do it only once when most of the parishioners can be present. The blessing verifies that mankind, and all of creation, were created to be filled with the sanctifying presence of God.

In connection with the feast, it is traditional for the priest to visit all the homes of the faithful for their annual house blessing using the water that has been blessed at the Theophany services.

Hymns

Troparion (Tone 1) When Thou, O Lord, wast baptized in the Jordan, worship of the Trinity wast made manifest; for the voice of the Father bore witness to Thee, calling Thee His beloved Son. And the Spirit in the form of a dove confirmed the truth of His word. O Christ our God, Who hath appeared and enlightened the world, glory to Thee.

Kontakion (Tone 4) On this day Thou hast appeared unto the whole world, and Thy light, O Sovereign Lord, is signed on us who sing Thy praise and chant with knowledge: Thou hast now come, Thou hast appeared, O Thou Light unapproachable.

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- **The Prayer for the Blessing of Homes at Theophany** <https://www.goarch.org/-/the-prayer-for-the-blessing-of-homes-at-theophany> [Greek orthodox]

Priest: Blessed is our God always, both now and ever, and to the ages of ages.

Reader: Amen.

Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us. (3)

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

All-Holy Trinity have mercy on us. Lord, be gracious to our sins. Master, forgive our transgressions. Holy One, visit us and heal our infirmities, for your name's sake. Lord, have mercy; Lord, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

Our Father who art in heaven,. . . Amen.

Troparion, Tone I

When You in Jordan for Your baptism were come, O Lord, then was revealed unto us to worship the Trinity, for lo, the Father's voice spoke to bear witness of You, by Name, declaring You His well-beloved Son; and the Spirit in form like a dove appeared to confirm the sure truth of the spoken Word; O Lord made manifest and light of the world, we give glory to You, O Christ our God.

Priest: Let us pray to the Lord. Lord have mercy.

O God our Savior, the True Light, Who was baptized *in the Jordan by the Prophet John, and Who did deign to enter under the roof-tree of Zacchaeus, bringing salvation unto him and unto his house: do You, the same Lord, keep safe also from harm those who dwell herein; grant to them Your blessing, purification and bodily health, and all their petitions that are unto salvation and Life everlasting; for blessed are You, as also Your Father Who is from everlasting, and Your All; Holy, Good and Life; creating Spirit, both now and ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen.

And the Priest shall bless the whole house with Holy Water, saying:

When you were baptized in the Jordan, O Lord, the worship of the Trinity was made manifest. For the voice of the Father bore witness to you, naming you his beloved Son. And the spirit, in the form of a dove, confirmed the certainty of the word. O Christ our God, who illumined the world, Glory to You!

Apolysis

May He Who condescended to be baptized in the river Jordan by the Forerunner and Prophet John, for our salvation, through the intercessions of His immaculate Mother, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, and of all the Saints, have mercy on us and save us, for He is our good and loving Lord.

The Priest proclaims: Grant, O Lord, a prosperous and peaceful life, health and salvation, and the furtherance of all good things to all Your servants (Names) who dwell herein, and preserve them for many years.

Reader: Many years! (3)

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Theophany House Blessing <http://www.dowama.org/sites/docs/TheophanyHouseBlessing.PDF>

During the days following the Feast of the Theophany (January 6th), it is customary for the Priest to visit the homes of his parishioners, bringing with him the “Jordan Water” for the traditional Theophany House

Blessing.¹ All who reside in the household should make every effort to be present for the Blessing. In anticipation of the arrival of the Priest to the house, the lampada, hand-censer and incense in the family’s icon corner should be prepared. (If there is no icon corner, a small table should be placed on the eastern wall of the main room of the dwelling; the table, covered with a white cloth, should be set with one or more icons standing upright, a candle in a candlestand, a hand-censer and incense). A small bowl along with several sprigs of evergreen bound together with a ribbon should also be placed in the icon corner (or on the table), along with a clearly printed list of the Baptismal names of the members of the household.

Upon the arrival of the Priest, he is to be greeted by all of the family members, each of whom asks the Priest’s blessing and reverences his right hand. Then a family member lights the lampada (or candle) and hand-censer and turns off all televisions, radios, etc. in the home. Lights should be turned on in all the rooms of the house that are to be blessed. Then the entire family gathers with the Priest before the icon corner (or table) to begin the Theophany House Blessing.

The Priest, vested in cassock and exorasson and facing the icons, blesses and dons his epitrachelion saying the usual vesting prayer. He then places incense upon the lighted charcoal in the hand-censer and blesses it saying the usual prayer. He then places his hand-cross at the icon corner (or on the table) and, after pouring “Jordan Water” into the bowl provided by the family, he blesses himself while intoning:

Priest Blessed is our God, always, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

All. Amen.

Priest Glory to Thee, our God. Glory to Thee. O heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of truth, who art everywhere present and fillest all things, the Treasury of good things and Giver of life:

¹ The First Great Sanctification of Water is performed at the end of the Divine Liturgy on the Paramon of Theophany (January 5th). While that water may be given to the faithful to drink on that day and throughout the coming year, it is only the water from the Second Great Sanctification, which is performed on the day of the Feast of Theophany (January 6th), that is used for the Theophany House Blessing.

Come, and abide in us, and cleanse us from every stain, and save our souls, O good One.

ALL: Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal: have mercy on us. (thrice)

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, both now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

All-holy Trinity, have mercy on us. Lord, cleanse us from our sins. Master, pardon our iniquities. Holy One, visit and heal our infirmities for Thy Name's sake.

Lord, have mercy. (thrice)

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, both now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Our Father, who art in the heavens, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

PRIEST: For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

ALL: Amen.

Then the Priest leads all in the chanting of the Apolytikion of Theophany in Tone 1:

When Thou, O Lord, wast baptized in the Jordan, worship of the Trinity was made manifest. For the voice of the Father bore witness to Thee, calling Thee His beloved Son. And the Spirit, in the likeness of a dove, confirmed the truth of His word. O Christ our God, who hast appeared and enlightened the world, glory to Thee.²

PRIEST: Have mercy on us, O God, according to Thy great mercy, we pray Thee, hearken and have mercy.

ALL: Lord, have mercy. (thrice)

PRIEST: Again we pray for all pious and Orthodox Christians. ALL: Lord, have mercy. (thrice)

² The following boxed text, the Ektenia and the Peace, may be omitted for the sake of brevity.

PRIEST: Again we pray for our Metropolitan N., our Bishop N., and all our brotherhood in Christ.

ALL: Lord, have mercy. (thrice)

PRIEST: Again we pray for mercy, life, peace, health, salvation, visitation and pardon and forgiveness of sins for the servants of God, (we mention by name all those who dwell in the house that is to be blessed) NN., and for all pious and Orthodox Christians who live and dwell in this community.

ALL: Lord, have mercy. (thrice)

PRIEST: For Thou art a merciful God and lovest mankind, and unto Thee we ascribe glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

ALL: Amen.

Turning to face the people, the Priest blesses them, saying: PRIEST: + Peace be to all.

ALL: And to thy spirit.

PRIEST: Let us bow our heads unto the Lord.

ALL: To Thee, O Lord.

All bow their heads as the Priest faces the icons and prays: PRIEST: Let us pray to the Lord.

ALL: Lord, have mercy.

PRIEST: Our God our Saviour, the True Light, who wast baptized by John in the Jordan to renew all men by the water of regeneration, and who didst condescend to enter under the roof of Zacchaeus, and didst thereby bring salvation to him and all his household: Do Thou now also, the same Lord, keep safe from harm all those

who dwell herein. Vouchsafe them sanctification, purification and health of body, and grant their petitions which are unto salvation and life everlasting: For blessed art Thou, O Christ our God, and unto Thee we ascribe glory together with Thine unoriginate Father and Thine all-holy and good and life-giving Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

ALL: Amen.

Then the head of the household takes up a lighted candle and leads through the house the Priest, who carries the bowl of “Jordan Water” and, using his hand-cross together with the bound sprigs of evergreen, sprinkles each room with the “Jordan Water.” It is customary that he sprinkle each doorway upon the lintel and at each side.

During the Theophany season (January 6th through the Leavetaking on January 14th) the festal Apolytikion “When Thou, O Lord wast baptized ...” is chanted repeatedly throughout the House Blessing; but should the House Blessing take place after the Leavetaking, the Apolytikion of the Cross (also in Tone 1) “O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance...” is chanted rather than that of Theophany. The other members of the household may walk behind the Priest if they wish or they may remain at the icon corner (or table). The procession through the house ends at the icon corner (or table). The Priest replaces the bowl and sprigs of evergreen in the icon corner (or on the table), and, holding the hand-cross and facing the people, he says the Dismissal:

PRIEST: Glory to Thee, O Christ our God and our Hope. Glory to Thee.

ALL: Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, both now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

Amen. Lord, have mercy. (thrice) Father, bless.

PRIEST: May He who deigned to be baptized by John in the Jordan for our salvation, Christ our true God, through the intercessions of His all- immaculate and all-blameless holy Mother, at the supplications of (the Patron Saint of the local church temple), of the holy and righteous ancestors of God Joachim and Anna, and of all the saints: have mercy on us, and save us, forasmuch as He is good and loveth mankind.

Through the prayers of our holy fathers, Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us, and save us.

ALL: Amen.

Again facing the holy icons, the Priest holds the hand-cross and intones:

PRIEST: Grant, O Lord, a peaceful life, health, salvation and furtherance in all good things to Thy servant(s), (we mention by name all those who dwell in the house that has been blessed) NN., and preserve him/her/them for many years!

He turns and blesses the people thrice with the hand-cross as all sing the “Many years.”

Those who dwell in the house then approach the Priest to reverence the hand-cross and his hand, and to be blessed with the “Jordan Water.”

It should be noted that it is customary for the head of the household to discreetly present the Priest with an envelope containing an honorarium and a list of the Living and Departed for whom the family requests his prayers during the New Year.

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The Feast of the Theophany

Part VII: Great Blessing of Water https://mci.archpitt.org/liturgy/Theophany_7.html

The **Great Blessing of Water** is perhaps the most memorable part of the Theophany services. Water, as a symbol of purification and cleansing, was at one time blessed as often as once a month; this Small Blessing of Water is still held on August 1, and as needed - for example, at events like the annual pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. But the Great Blessing of Water, connected explicitly with the blessing of the Jordan River which occurred at the baptism of the Lord, is done each year on Theophany, January 6.

According to the Typikon, this blessing is actually done twice:

- Once on the eve of the feast, when water is blessed in a container in the church, for use in church and in the homes of the faithful.
- Again on the morning of the feast itself, when a nearby source of "living water" (a lake, river, stream, or spring) is blessed.

In practice, most parishes only hold the Great Blessing of Water once each year, in church after the Divine Liturgy either on the eve or on the day of the feast. The blessing takes place after the Ambon Prayer of Vespers with Divine Liturgy (on the eve) or of the Divine Liturgy on the morning of Theophany. (If Theophany falls on Sunday or Monday, and Vespers without Divine Liturgy is celebrated on the eve of Theophany, then the blessing on the eve is done after the conclusion of Vespers.)

This page describes the service of the Great Blessing of Water. The complete service can be found in the MCI booklet ([PDF](#)) for the service.

The Procession

The service begins with stichera, which would be sung as processional hymns when the blessing is conducted outdoors. When water is blessed within the church, these stichera are sung by the cantor and people as an introduction to the service.

The Readings

When the procession (or stichera) are concluded, we hear readings from the Old Testament, the Apostolic Writings, and the Gospel.

The three Old Testament readings are all taken from the prophecies of Isaiah:

- The first reading (Isaiah 35: 1-10) foretells a time when "streams will burst forth in the desert, " and the desert and the parched land will see the glory of the Lord. "Those whom the Lord has redeemed will return and enter Zion singing, crowned with everlasting joy."
- The second reading (Isaiah 55: 1-13) promises a renewal of the everlasting covenant that God made with his people. "All you who are thirsty, come to the water!"
- The third reading (Isaiah 12: 3-6) promises a time when the Holy One of Israel will be in the midst of his people: "With joy you will draw water from the well of salvation."

The prokeimenon which precedes the Epistle once again reminds us that God Himself is our light and our Savior:
The Lord is my light and my help; whom shall I fear?

The Epistle reading (1 Corinthians 10: 1-4) reminds Saint Paul's listeners of the Israelites in the desert, who were baptized by the cloud and the sea, and who ate the same spiritual food (the manna in the desert). "They all drank the same spiritual drink; they drank from the spiritual rock that was following them, and the rock was Christ."

The verses of the Alleluia remind us of the stupendous things which are taking place:

V. The Lord's voice resounding on the waters, the Lord is on the immensity of the waters.
V. The God of glory thunders; the Lord is on the immensity of the waters.

And yet almost by contrast, the Gospel reading (Mark 1: 9-11) gives the simplest possible summary of these events:

At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. Immediately on coming up out of the water, he saw the sky rent in two and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. Then a voice came from the heavens: "You are my beloved son. On you my favor rests."

The Gospel is followed by a litany, in which the deacon (or priest) directs us to pray "that these waters may be given the grace of redemption, the blessing of the river Jordan by the power, action, and descent of the Holy Spirit". We are now reading for the blessing itself.

The Blessing of the Water

Three times, the priest makes the sign of the cross in the water with a three-branched candle (signifying the Holy Trinity), saying each time: Great are you, O Lord, and wonderful are your works; no word suffices to give praise to your wonders.

Then he prays aloud, recounting the many reasons we have to praise God, in company with the angels and all creation. Breathing upon the water three times in the form of a cross, he says each time:

O Loving King, come now and through the descent of the Holy Spirit sanctify this water.

The breath is an ancient symbol of life bestowed; the Greek word for "spirit" is the same as "breath"; our Lord breathed on his disciples when he said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Then the priest prays aloud, asking God to bless the waters, and giving the reason for our hope and expectation of such a blessing:

Grant it the grace of redemption and the blessing of the Jordan.
Make it a fount of incorruptibility, a gift of sanctification, a redemption of sins,
a healing potion for illness, and a destroyer of demons.
Make it immune to hostile powers,
and fill it with angelic power so that all who drink and receive of it may be purified in soul and body,
cured of ills, sanctified in their homes, and given every befitting grace.

For you are our God, who through water and the Spirit rejuvenated our nature grown old by sin.
You are our God, who drowned sin in the waters at the time of Noah.
You are our God, who, on the sea and at the hands of Moses, delivered the Hebrews from the bondage of Pharaoh.
You are our God, who split the rock in the wilderness, so that the waters gushed out,
and the valleys overflowed, and the people were satisfied.
You are our God, who, with fire and water, and at the hands of Elijah, delivered Israel from the errors of Baal.

Finally, the priest makes the sign of the cross in the water with his hand, three times, saying each time:
Wherefore, O Master, sanctify this water by your Holy Spirit.

and prays aloud:

Grant sanctification, blessing, cleansing, and health
to all who touch it, are blessed with it, or who partake of it.
O Lord, save your servants, our civil authorities.
Keep them in peace within your protective shadow, granting them all salutary requests and eternal life.
May your all-holy name be glorified by the elements, by men, by angels, by all that is visible or invisible,
together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and forever.

and the people respond, "Amen." The blessing of the waters is complete.

The Blessing of the People

Now the priest turns to the people, bids them to bow their heads, and prays for them:

Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear us. You sanctified the water when you consented to be baptized in the Jordan; now bless us who through the bowing of our heads signify our servitude. Grant that we be filled with your sanctification by the partaking of this water, and let it be for the healing of our souls and bodies, O Lord.

He sings the troparion of Theophany ("At your baptism in the Jordan, O Lord..."), which the people repeat twice, while the priest lowers the hand-cross (representing the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ) into the water three times. He then sprinkles the people with the newly-blessed water. The clergy and faithful come forward to kiss the cross and be blessed with the Jordan water, while the following hymn (sticheron) is sung:

Let us praise in song, O faithful, the greatness of the favor of God to us.
For, having become man because of our transgressions,
he is purified in the Jordan for our purification.
He, the only pure and spotless One,
sanctifies me and the waters,
and crushes the heads of the dragons in the waters.
Wherefore, O brothers and sisters, let us take of that water with joy!
For the grace of the Holy Spirit is invisibly imparted to all who, in faith, take thereof,
by Christ our God, who is also the Savior of our souls.

Then the priest gives the dismissal for Theophany: May Christ our true God, who for our salvation deigned to be baptized by John in the Jordan, have mercy on us and save us...

Afterwards, it is customary for the faithful to drink of the newly blessed water, and to bear it away to their homes for use throughout the year.

Recommended Reading

- *The Byzantine Rite Celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord, with the Traditional Blessing of the Water and the Blessing of Homes.* Byzantine Leaflet Series, No. 9. (Pittsburgh: Byzantine Seminary Press, December 1977).
- Father Thomas Hopko. *The Winter Pascha.* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984). An excellent account of the feasts of the Nativity and Theophany.

Holy water (from Orthodox Wiki https://orthodoxwiki.org/Holy_water)

Holy water is water that has been blessed by a bishop or priest for use in the rites of the Orthodox Church including baptism, blessing persons, places, and objects or as a means of repelling evil.

Usage

A quantity of holy water is typically kept in a font placed near the entrance of the church where it is available for anyone who needs it. Holy water is sometimes sprinkled on items or people when they are blessed, as part of the prayers of blessing. For instance, in Alaska, the fishing boats are sprinkled with holy water at the start of the fishing season as the priest prays for the crews' safety and success. Orthodox Christians most often bless themselves with holy water by drinking it. It is traditional to keep a quantity of it at home, and many Orthodox Christians will drink a small amount daily with their morning prayers. It may also be used for informal blessings when no clergy are present. For example, parents might bless their children with holy water before they leave the house for school or play.

The use of holy water is based on the story of Jesus' baptism by Saint John the Baptist in the River Jordan and the Orthodox interpretation of this event. In this view, John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, and the people came to have their sins washed away by the water. Since Jesus had no sin, but was God himself, his baptism had the effect of Jesus blessing the water, making it holy, that is used fully for its original created purpose to be an instrument of life.

Theophany

The **Great Blessing of Water** is held on the eve of the feast of the Theophany (January 5) and/or the feast of Theophany itself (January 6), following the Divine Liturgy. The blessing remembers the event of the Lord's baptism, the revelation of the Holy Trinity, and also expresses Orthodoxy's belief that creation is sanctified through Christ.

Jesus' baptism is commemorated in the Orthodox Church at the Feast of Theophany (literally "God shining forth"). At the Vespers of this feast, a font of holy water is typically blessed in the church, to provide holy water for the parish's use in the coming year. The next morning in some parishes, the prayers often include a trip to a nearby river, lake or other public source of drinking water, to bless that water as well. This represents the redemption of all creation as part of humanity's salvation. In the following weeks, the priest typically visits the homes of the parish's members and prays prayers of blessing for their families, homes and pets, sprinkling them with holy water. Again, this practice is meant to visibly represent God's sanctifying work in all parts of the people's lives.

Holy water can also be blessed at any other time of the year if there is a need, and this is usually done on the first day of a month. The holy water used for a baptism is blessed as part of the baptism service.

Great Blessing of Water

On the feast of Holy Theophany holy water is blessed twice, at the conclusion of the Divine Liturgies both on the eve and on the feast itself. After processing to the place where the vessel of water is prepared to the singing of appropriate troparia there are a group of Scripture readings culminating in the baptism account from the Gospel of Saint Mark (1:9-11) followed by the Great Litany. This is sung just as for the Liturgy, but with the following additional petitions which make clear what is being asked of God and what the use, purpose, and blessing of the water is believed to entail.

That these waters may be sanctified by the power, and effectual operation, and descent of the Holy Spirit:

That there may descend upon these waters the cleansing operation of the super-substantial Trinity:

That he will endue them with the grace of redemption, the blessing of Jordan, the might, and operation, and descent of the Holy Spirit:

That Satan may speedily be crushed under our feet, and that every evil counsel directed against us may be brought to naught:

That the Lord our God will free us from every attack and temptation of the enemy, and make us worthy of the good things which he hath promised:

That he will illumine us with the light of understanding and of piety, and with the descent of the Holy Spirit:

That the Lord our God will send down the blessing of Jordan and sanctify these waters:

That this water may be unto the bestowing of sanctification; unto the remission of sins; unto the healing of soul and body; and unto every expedient service:

That this water may be a fountain welling forth unto life eternal:

That it may manifest itself effectual unto the averting of every machination of our foes, whether visible or invisible:

For those who shall draw of it and take of it unto the sanctification of their homes:

That it may be for the purification of the souls and bodies of all those who, with faith, shall draw and partake of it:

That he will graciously enable us to perfect sanctification by participation in these waters, through the invisible manifestation of the Holy Spirit:

Then, following a lengthy set of didactic prayers that expound on the nature of the feast and summarize salvation history, praising God's creation of and mastery over the elements, the priest makes the Sign of the Cross over the water with his hand and prays specifically for the blessing to be invoked upon it. At the climax of the service, he immerses the hand cross into the water three times in imitation of Christ's baptism to the singing of the festal troparion and then blesses the entire church and congregation with the newly consecrated water.

Blessing the water

The blessing the water begins with the chanting of special hymns, with the censing of the water, and concludes with Bible readings, petitions and prayers.

The water is in a large container in the middle of the nave, or the service may be held at a freely flowing natural source. If celebrated indoors, the container of water may be decorated with candles and flowers as the symbol of the beauty of God's original creation through his Word and Spirit. During the service, a cross is dipped three times into the water.

After the blessing service, the faithful fill their containers to take some holy water home with them. This water is also used to bless homes during the Theophany season.

Water is seen by the Church as the prime element of creation. In blessing water, it is asked that the original purpose of water, as a source of life, blessing and holiness be revealed as one drinks it. In the Book of Genesis, creation began when the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters.

In the blessing of water it is seen that the world and everything in it is "very good" (Gen. 1:31) and when it becomes corrupted, God saves it once more by effecting the new creation in Christ, his divine Son and our Lord by the grace of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 6:15).

The celebration of the Great Blessing of Water is an affirmation that through Christ's own baptism, he has lifted the curse of Adam's sin, and given the creative goodness of God's creation back to mankind once again. Thus when Christians are baptized, they are baptized into Christ, part of the creation that is sanctified in Christ.

Blessing of the Home and Household on Epiphany *From Catholic Bishops*

The traditional date of Epiphany is January 6, but in the United States it is celebrated on the Sunday between January 2 and January 8.

When all have gathered, a suitable song may be sung. The leader makes the sign of the cross, and all reply, "Amen." The leader greets those present in the following words:

Let us praise God, who fills our hearts and homes with peace. Blessed be God forever.

R/. Blessed be God forever.

In the following or similar words, the leader prepares those present for the blessing:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling place among us. It is Christ who enlightens our hearts and homes with his love. May all who enter this home find Christ's light and love.

One of those present or the leader reads a text of sacred Scripture, for example, Luke 19:1-9:

Listen to the words of the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Jesus came to Jericho and intended to pass through the town. Now a man there named Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man, was seeking to see who Jesus was; but he could not see him because of the crowd, for he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus, who was about to pass that way.> When he reached the place, Jesus looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house." And he came down quickly and received him with joy. When they all saw this, they began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner." But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Behold, half of

my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham.”

The intercessions are then said:

Leader: The Son of God made his home among us. With thanks and praise let us call upon him.

R/. Stay with us, Lord.

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, with Mary and Joseph you formed the Holy Family: remain in our home, that we may know you as our guest and honor you as our Head.

We pray:

R/. Stay with us, Lord.

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, you had no place to lay your head, but in the spirit of poverty accepted the hospitality of your friends: grant that through our help the homeless may obtain proper housing.

We pray:

R/. Stay with us, Lord.

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, the three kings presented their gifts to you in praise and adoration: grant that those living in this house may use their talents and abilities to your greater glory.

We pray:

R/. Stay with us, Lord.

After the intercessions the leader invites all present to say the Lord's Prayer. The leader says the prayer of blessing with hands joined:

Lord God of heaven and earth, you revealed your only-begotten Son to every nation by the guidance of a star.

Bless this house and all who inhabit it. Fill them (us) with the light of Christ, that their (our) concern for others may reflect your love. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

R/. Amen.

May Christ Jesus dwell with us, keep us from all harm, and make us one in mind and heart, now and forever.

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Holy water or anointing oil, or both, may be used as part of blessing each room. If water is to be blessed, the following form may be used. If water is used, it is sprinkled in each room from a small sprig of evergreen in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit by one of the leaders, a member of the family, or a friend immediately following each prayer. When oil is used, it is sparsely placed above the lintel of each door and window, including closets in the sign of the cross dedicating each space and portal to uses according to the will of God in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Blessing the Water

We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.

Grant, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that this water be sanctified to be a sign of your dominion over all that it might touch. **Amen.**