

[Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Ps. 104; Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7;
Luke 3:15-16, 21-22]

Before celebrating his first group Baptism of babies, a newly-ordained priest took special care to make sure everything was ready: his book of the rite, the oils, the candles, the cotton swabs, the small white linen towels. The whole Baptism ceremony seemed to go smoothly.

He got all eight of the children's names right without a cue card. But as he was getting ready to read the concluding prayer, one of the grandmothers touched his sleeve and whispered gently, "You forgot to pour the holy water on the babies."

Sacraments have always been communal events. Luke sets the scene of Jesus' Baptism in our Gospel today by first describing the crowd: "The people were filled with expectation." John the Baptist and Jesus Himself are not mentioned in the first words of today's Gospel: "The people were filled with enthusiasm." Everything we understand about sacraments tells us that it was the presence of the crowd – their energy and anticipation for what was to unfold, the prayers and wonderings held fervently in each heart – that allowed the flow of God's grace to be made manifest in Jesus. Remember those times when Jesus visited villages but could perform no miracles or healing there, because of the lack of faith of the people? In today's passage, there is great expectation.

My priest and organist friends comment that at some Funeral Masses, the crowd is so silent and non-participatory, the priest cannot tell who is deader: the crowd or the body in the casket!

You and I can and must enter every sacramental experience as full, conscious, and active participants, ready to be conduits for the flow of grace that God is continually pouring out. The celebrant leads, the presider presides.

But the members of the community are essential, adding their prayers and enthusiasm to the proceedings. Thank you for doing every time we gather each week for Sunday Mass. Your presence, your participation and your prayer all inspire me.

The Liturgy last week revealed the mystery of God's plan -- that in Jesus Christ, the Anointed, the Messiah -- all peoples, symbolized by the Magi, have been made "coheirs" to the blessings promised to Israel. This week, we're shown how we claim our inheritance.

Jesus doesn't submit to John's baptism as a sinner in need of forgiveness and purification. He humbles Himself to pass through Jordan's waters in order to lead a new "exodus" -- opening up not only the Promised Land on earth, but the Promised Land of Heaven so that all peoples can hear the words pronounced over Jesus today, words once reserved only for Israel and its king: that each of us is a beloved son or daughter of God.

Jesus is the chosen servant Isaiah prophesies in today's First Reading, anointed with the Spirit to make things right and just on earth. God puts His Spirit upon Jesus to make Him "a covenant of the people," -- the word "Covenant" is heard in the consecration prayer of the wine at Mass -- the liberator of the captives, the light to the nations.

Jesus, in today's alternate Second Reading from the Letter to Titus tells us, is the long- expected One in Israel, "anointed . . . with the Holy Spirit and power."

In our First Reading, Isaiah praises and lifts up the Lord's servant, in Whom He is well pleased and upon Whom He has put His Spirit. But that is also each one of us on the day of our own baptism.

God has formed each one of us, grasps you and me by the hand as a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring spiritual prisoners out of confinement, to be a light those who live in darkness. My favorite passage from the Book of Isaiah is 61:1 – words repeated by Jesus as He begins His public ministry. The same words apply to you and me. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to release prisoners from the darkness. To proclaim a year of favor from the poor."

Time for you and me to get busy!

Titus lists the benefits of our baptism. God saves us, gives us rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit. We are now sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, and heirs in hope of eternal life. St. John also says this in his first letter. Titus then tells us what is expected of us because we have been baptized. To reject godless ways and worldly desires. To live temperately, justly and devoutly in this age. To live in faith, hope and charity.

When a voice from Heaven proclaims Jesus to be the Beloved Son, the pleasure of God, we understand that Jesus enjoys that

premiere place in the sight of God. Where do YOU hear the voice of God? How do you respond to it?

How do you and I, with so many hills and valleys in our spiritual journey, hope to become in any sense pleasing to God? First of all we don't have to earn anything: We already are the pleasure of God!

If a voice from Heaven speaks today over this assembly, it surely declares that WE are beloved children NOW. How does the way you live, reflect what you believe -- that you are genuinely and truly loved by God?

In a real sense, these readings at the end of the Christmas season today bring us back and full circle to the first Sunday of Advent of last month. St. John the Baptist began Advent when he charges us to "Repent and Believe the Good News."

Luke says that with the exuberant preaching of John the Baptist, "The people were filled with expectation." Do I have a sense of joyful expectation about life? Is there a sense of expectation in the community I serve?

The spirit of those words are heard in today's Gospel. We are reminded that when you love someone and you see in their eyes the person they imagine you to be, your best version of yourself, you want to become that, quite naturally.

As they sing at the end of the musical, *Les Miserables*: To love another person is to see the face of God. AMEN!