

Baptism marks the beginning. It is an initiation rite of cleansing and entrance. It is an indication of a candidate's intention to live in a new way.

The baptism that John was offering was one of preparation and repentance in anticipation of the arrival of the Messiah.

It seems odd then that Jesus, as the Messiah, was going out to the wilderness to participate in this act of repentance. This becomes a powerful gesture on Jesus' part to identify with and enter fully into the condition and experience of being human.

In this baptism the beloved Son of God descends to the level of one needing repentance - a sinner. Through this baptism the Word made flesh becomes *one of us* by going down into the waters of the Jordan. Alongside all those from the the region of Judea, Jerusalem and beyond who flocked to John in the wilderness to be baptized by him in the Jordan, Jesus also comes, shoulder to shoulder with all

of them, without any words, to say most powerfully by his actions what he came to fulfill: "*I am with you.*"

Baptism is also a putting to death of things. Throughout the Bible water was considered a place of death. It was dark, dangerous and possessed an unpredictable force that could not be controlled. Underneath the water would lurk immense creatures like whales and leviathan that could consume you. Storms could arise on the sea and waves could batter your boat without warning so you could drown. The sea was where the swine herd tumbled over the edge of the cliff to their death after they were possessed by the legion of demons. Water was the place of the cursed. It was a place of chaos.

So it is no surprise that Jesus walks on the water, and calms the storm. It is no surprise that in the new heaven and new earth, it is described that the sea would be no more. The place of death would be overcome.

So the act of descending under the water in baptism meant that you were descending to the dead. In so doing you would die. The old self, the sinful self, and all the habits associated

therein would be put to death and drowned. And you would emerge out of the water gasping for breath, a new breath, made as a new creation. The old order has passed away.

So when Jesus participates in this baptism, he descends to the place of the dead. And he comes up out of the murky waters of the Jordan River, up out of the watery tomb of death; he gasps for air, and then the most extraordinary thing happens: the heaven is torn apart and everyone there is given a glimpse of heaven on earth. They hear a voice from heaven declare Jesus' connection with the Father, an inseparable connection that not even death can destroy. It is an indestructible bond based on love.

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Holy Spirit comes upon him in the form of a dove.

This is a rare moment in the gospels when all three members of the Trinity are present: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It is why we hear this morning from Isaiah: “But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do

not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.*”

The psalm today describes the power of the voice of the Lord. “The voice of the Lord is *upon the waters...* The voice of the Lord is a glorious voice.”

On this day, as we begin a new season of Epiphany, when Jesus descended under the waters to the place of death, he emerges from its depths by the powerful voice of his Father who claims him as his own: “The Beloved.” It will be the same voice that calls Lazarus out of the tomb, and calls Jesus up from hell. And it is the same voice that calls you and me, regardless of whatever waters threaten to overwhelm us, to a new way of living. You are the beloved of God; and through Christ, with you God is well pleased.

