THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

LECTIONARY #21

READING I Isaiah 55:1–11

Isaiah = ī-ZAY-uh

An exhortatory reading of grandeur and power. Its argument makes use of the imperative voice in verbs such as "heed" and "seek." These are the words of the Lord that you are speaking directly to the assembly.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah

Thus says the LORD:
All you who are **thirsty**,
come to the **water**!
You who have no **money**,
come, receive **grain** and **eat**;
come, without paying and without **cost**,
drink **wine** and **milk**!
Why spend your **money** for what is not **bread**,
your **wages** for what fails to **satisfy**?
Heed me, and you shall **eat** well,
you shall **delight** in rich fare.
Come to me **heedfully**,
listen, that you may have **life**.
I will **renew with you** the everlasting **covenant**,
the **benefits** assured to David.
As I made him a **witness** to the **peoples**,
a **leader** and **commander** of nations,
so shall you summon a nation you knew not,
and **nations** that knew you **not** shall run to you,
because of the **LORD**, your **God**,
the **Holy One** of Israel, who has **glorified** you.

Seek the LORD while **he** may be found,
call him while he is **near**. »

The renewal of the everlasting covenant is what unifies this whole reading. The promise of this covenant is what compels the Lord to tell the people to listen.

Place even stress on all the words in this line.

There are options for today's readings. Contact your parish staff to learn which readings will be used.

READING I **Isaiah 55.** The Old Testament is filled with stories of prophecies that warn against the failure to seek conversion and follow the way of the Lord. Take, for example, Moses' battle with Pharaoh in Exodus (Exodus 5). Moses helps to forecast God's displeasure with Pharaoh's hard-heartedness in Egypt's gradual demise through the ten plagues. Likewise the message of Jonah to the Ninevites is equally severe: "Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). Isaiah, too, chastises the pride of Samaria, likening its people to those whose lives have been ravaged by drunkenness. Indeed, the Old Testament prophets understood clearly that reform and change of heart were necessary for the reception of God's Word.

However, in this reading from Isaiah, the words of the prophet come in the form of an invitation rather than a warning. Rather than accentuating gloom and doom, Isaiah proclaims the bounty of a God who freely gives. "Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost." What an attractive summons! God promises the gifts of fortification without needing to be reimbursed! At least not financially. Instead, he wants one thing: for the people to listen to him. God makes his desire known: "Come to me heedfully, listen, that you may have life."

From the initial invitation to come to the water (representing the fullness of life that God promises) Isaiah proceeds in verses eight to eleven to describe more

Let the **scoundrel** forsake his way,
and the **wicked man** his thoughts;
let him **turn** to the **LORD** for **mercy**;
to our **God**, who is **generous** in **forgiving**.
For my **thoughts** are not your **thoughts**,
nor are your ways **my ways**, says the LORD.
As **high** as the heavens are above the **earth**
so **high** are my ways above your ways
and my **thoughts** above your **thoughts**.

For **just** as from the heavens
the **rain** and **snow** come **down**
and **do not** return there
till they have **watered** the **earth**,
making it **fertile** and **fruitful**,
giving **seed** to the one who **sows**
and **bread** to the one who **eats**,
so shall my word be
that goes **forth** from my **mouth**;
my **word** shall not **return** to me **void**,
but shall **do my will**,
achieving the end for which I **sent** it.

The rain and the snow, and the fertility they increase, are signs of God's word, similarly fertile.

Even stresses on these words.

Again, even stresses.

Or:

TO KEEP IN MIND
The words in bold are suggestions for ways to express the meaning of the reading. Consider using them as you practice the reading, then choose to stress them or to find your own way of proclaiming.

fully what this listening might look like. First, listening to God entails the recognition that God's ways are beyond human comprehension. Thus, listening to God requires the suspension of human expectations. Second, listening means that one is able to see that God's actions in this world successfully achieve his intentions: "My word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it. Although the world may fail to see the way in which God plants the seeds of his kingdom, those who listen to him reap the benefits of its growth.

Isaiah 42. The first four verses of today's reading constitute the first of Isaiah's four Suffering Servant songs. These poems were written to describe God's intention to send a Messiah, meaning the "anointed" one, who would usher in a kingdom of lasting peace. Rather than mentioning the context of suffering, this first poem introduces the Messiah as the one who pleases God. He will work tirelessly for the dawning of justice and will not be discouraged.

Verses six and seven shift from an introduction of the Messiah to God's speaking directly to his servant and commissioning him to be a "light for the Gentiles." This servant, governed by the Spirit, will not exhibit power through the destruction of life, but rather, he will be one to heal and overturn the evil of this world, such as giving sight to the blind, setting captives free, and illuminating the way of those trapped in darkness.

God's covenant with Israel comes very much into play when reflecting on the ministry of the Messiah. The people redeemed from slavery in Egypt, led into the Promised Land by God's angel, and then subjected to captivity in Babylon

READING I Isaiah 42:1–4, 6–7

Isaiah = ī-ZAY-uh

An exhortatory reading in which the Lord identifies his servant, characterizing his virtues in terms of his humility and preparedness, followed by a passage in which the Lord shifts from talking about his chosen servant in the third person ("he") to the second person ("you"), which allows you to direct your proclamation to the gathered assembly. Take advantage of this shift in pronouns.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah

Thus says the **LORD**:
Here is my **servant** whom I uphold,
my **chosen one** with whom I am **pleased**,
upon whom I have **put** my spirit;
he shall bring forth **justice** to the **nations**,
not crying **out**, not **shouting**,
not making his **voice heard** in the **street**.
A bruised reed he shall not break,
and a **smoldering wick** he shall not **quench**,
until he establishes **justice** on the **earth**;
the **coastlands** will wait for his **teaching**.

Even stresses on the words in this line, which present a compelling image. A bruised reed is easy to break; why isn't the chosen servant breaking the reed?

I, the **LORD**, have **called** you for the **victory** of justice,
I have **grasped you** by the hand;
I **formed** you, and **set** you
as a **covenant** of the people,
a **light** for the nations,
to open the **eyes** of the **blind**,
to bring out **prisoners** from **confinement**,
and from the **dungeon**, those who live in **darkness**.

Emphasize "grasped you" and "formed you."

The passage ends with images of dire things the Lord will use "you" to correct.

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Isaiah 12:2–3, 4bcd, 5–6 (3)

R. You will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation.

God indeed is my savior;
I am confident and unafraid.
My strength and my courage is the LORD,
and he has been my savior.
With joy you will draw water
at the fountain of salvation.

Give thanks to the LORD, acclaim his name;
among the nations make known his deeds,
proclaim how exalted is his name.

Sing praise to the LORD for his
glorious achievement;
let this be known throughout all
the earth.
Shout with exultation, O city of Zion,
for great in your midst
is the Holy One of Israel!

Or:

surely struggled with the way God revealed Israel as his chosen people. If chosen, then why not powerful and mighty in stature? If chosen, why did Israel experience so much suffering throughout its history? The same could be asked of God's servant. If called "for the victory of justice" and led by God's hand, why must the Messiah suffer? The answer boils down to faithfulness. Just as the Suffering Servant trusts unconditionally in the will of God, so must Israel learn that God desires most of all a listening, obedient heart.

READING II **Acts.** Due to the vision he received in a trance earlier in this tenth chapter of Acts, Peter recognizes that God does not show favoritism. While he was alone praying, he realized he was hungry and was shown, in his vision, a variety of living creatures that could serve as food. When he utters words of resistance, calling these animals unclean, or profane, a voice says to him, "What God has made clean, you are not to call profane." (Acts 10:9–16). As Peter is left to ruminate on the vision, he is approached by a group of men requesting that he come with them to the house of Cornelius. Because Cornelius is a Roman centurion, he is to be considered unclean according to Jewish customs. However, Peter makes the connection between this invitation to enter Cornelius' house and his dream and concludes, "God has shown me that I should not call any person profane or unclean" (Acts 10:28).

Fast-forward to today's reading. Peter is standing before a large crowd gathered in the house of Cornelius. These verses are part of a short catechesis that Peter imparts regarding the person of Jesus Christ, whom

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 29:1–2, 3–4, 3, 9–10 (11b)

R. The Lord will bless his people with peace.

Give to the LORD, you sons of God,
give to the LORD glory and praise,
give to the LORD the glory due his name;
adore the LORD in holy attire.

The voice of the LORD is over the waters,
the LORD, over vast waters.

The voice of the LORD is mighty;
the voice of the LORD is majestic.

The God of glory thunders,
and in his temple all say, "Glory!"
The LORD is enthroned above the flood;
the LORD is enthroned as king forever.

READING II 1 John 5:1–9

A reading from the first Letter of Saint John

A somewhat complex exhortatory reading in that it makes claims about love in terms of obedience, and obedience in terms of faith. The reading divides in two. The first part focuses on love and keeping the commandments. The second part insists on the life of the Spirit that testifies of the Son.

"Commandments" is repeated three times and then followed by the word "burdensome." Be sure to stress the word "not" before "burdensome." And then emphasize the word "victory" to diffuse any lingering connection.

Allow the repetition of "water and blood" to resonate. Likewise the repetitions of "Spirit," "three," and "testify" (and its variants) that dominate the second part of this reading.

Beloved:
Everyone who believes that **Jesus** is the **Christ** is **begotten**
by God,
and everyone who loves the **Father**
loves also the one **begotten** by him.
In this way we **know** that we **love** the children of **God**
when we **love God** and **obey** his commandments.
For the **love** of **God** is **this**,
that we **keep** his **commandments**.
And his **commandments** are not **burdensome**,
for whoever is **begotten** by God **conquers** the world.
And the **victory** that conquers the world is our **faith**.
Who indeed is the **victor** over the world
but the one who believes that **Jesus** is the Son of God?

This is the one who came through water and blood, **Jesus Christ**,
not by water alone, but by water and blood.
The **Spirit** is the one who **testifies**,
and the **Spirit** is truth.

God anointed "with the Holy Spirit and power" (Acts 10:38). Peter's preaching begins with the admission that God does not show favoritism. Thus, the reader is able to see how Peter himself comes to the recognition that the preaching of Christ is not meant to be exclusive in any way. As he continued to describe for the crowd the mission that Jesus left to his followers, the Holy Spirit "fell upon all who were listening to the word" (Acts 10:44). Although the circumcised visitors to Cornelius' house find it difficult to believe that the Spirit would descend upon the Gentiles in the room, Peter is quick to see God's indiscriminate grace, and orders that all be baptized (Acts 10:48).

The transformation of Peter's worldview, from one of seeing the need to distinguish the clean from the unclean to one of recognizing God's goodness extending to all of creation is particularly important in our articulation of a theology of Baptism. While it may be tempting to think of Baptism as making a person more "holy," it is really meant to be a sacrament that helps us to live into the unity of Christ that God desires for the whole world. Baptism is a social leveler that breaks down divisions between male and female, Jew and Greek, slave and freeperson (Galatians 3:28). God does not show favoritism.

1 John. The three letters of John are believed to have been written at the close of the first century AD. They represent the time of transition from the Apostolic Period to the time of the infant institutional Church. Like so many of the New Testament epistles, the First Letter of John was written to several churches who were battling heresies that proposed that Jesus was not truly God. Some in the community

So there are **three** that **testify**,
the **Spirit**, the **water** and the **blood**,
and the **three** are of **one accord**.
If we **accept** human testimony,
the testimony of **God** is surely greater.
Now the testimony of **God** is **this**,
that he has **testified** on **behalf** of his **Son**.

Or:

TO KEEP IN MIND
Make eye contact with the assembly. This helps keep the assembly engaged with the reading.

READING II Acts of the Apostles 10:34–38

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles

An exhortatory reading in a narrative context, spoken by Peter to some early apostles of Jesus. This reading expresses ancient convictions of the earliest members of the faith.

Peter proceeded to speak to those gathered
in the **house** of Cornelius, saying:
"In **truth**, I see that **God** shows no **partiality**.
Rather, in every nation whoever **fears** him and acts **uprightly**
is **acceptable** to him.
You know the **word** that he sent to the **Israelites**
as he proclaimed **peace** through Jesus **Christ**,
who is **Lord** of all,
what has **happened** all over **Judea**,
beginning in Galilee after the **baptism**
that John preached,
how God **anointed** Jesus of Nazareth
with the **Holy Spirit** and **power**.
He went about doing **good**
and healing all those oppressed by the devil,
for **God** was **with** him."

"Peace," "Christ," and "Lord" express a unified vision of things.

Even emphasis on the words of this line.

Even emphasis here as well, characterizing Jesus' powers.

believed themselves to be above the law and therefore not susceptible to accusations of immorality. John's reproach calls them to return to the basic Commandments, especially the prescription to "love one another" (1 John 3:11).

In this portion of the letter, John argues that keeping the commands of God is the essential way that people can be assured that they are God's children. Rather than seeing the commands of God as a heavy burden, disciples of Jesus are to understand them as a way "to conquer the world." John makes it abundantly certain that conquering the world cannot be done according to one's own design and one's own spiritual prowess, rather only "the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God" can do this.

Verses 6–9 of this chapter continue by spelling out the evidence for this assertion of faith. The three forms of testimony are water, blood, and the Spirit. Tradition holds that John understands the water to be a symbol for Jesus' purity and the blood to be a symbol for his sufferings. The Spirit recognizes both the spotlessness of Jesus' mission and the fullness of his sacrifice. Likewise, disciples are to strive for purity in their relations and complete dedication in their faith.

GOSPEL Many theologians have struggled to make sense of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan. The general question they debate is, if Jesus is the Son of God, was it necessary that he be baptized? In some ways, John's own words in the first two verses of this Gospel reading would suggest that the answer to this question is no, as he is quite clear that the power and the authority of the one who is

GOSPEL Mark 1:7–11

A narrative reading that emphasizes John the Baptist as the precursor to Jesus in two parts. The first focuses on John the Baptist's ministry foretelling the coming of Jesus; the second focuses on Jesus' baptism at the hands of John the Baptist. These scriptural prefigurations are like theological rhymes.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

This is what John the Baptist proclaimed:
"One **mightier** than I is coming **after** me.
I am not worthy to **stoop** and **loosen** the thongs of his sandals.
I have baptized you with water;
he will **baptize** you with the **Holy Spirit**."

Even emphasis on the words of this line.

It happened in those days that **Jesus** came from **Nazareth**
of Galilee
and was **baptized** in the **Jordan** by **John**.
On coming up out of the water he saw the **heavens** being
torn **open**
and the **Spirit**, like a **dove**, descending **upon** him.
And a voice came from the heavens,
"**You** are my beloved **Son**; with you I am well **pleased**."

Likewise, even emphasis on these words.

to come after him are far greater than his own. However, it is necessary to acknowledge the nature of the baptism performed by John. He sought to prepare hearts for the coming of God's Kingdom; thus, his baptism was a visible means of sealing conversion. While Jesus may not have needed any sort of conversion, his willingness to be baptized represents his total allegiance to the Kingdom. In the water, Jesus himself becomes the very sign of the dawning of the Kingdom. What John has been pointing to has now been fully revealed in Jesus.

For this reason, the Holy Spirit plays a particularly important role at the baptism of the Lord. First of all, John states in verse 8 that "he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." This suggestion of the Spirit as the gift of Baptism must be connected to what Jesus experiences in the Jordan in verses 10–11. As he emerges from the water, he sees the Spirit descend upon him and he hears a heavenly voice declare: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." The seeing of the Spirit and the hearing of the voice ratify this relationship. It is not the sealing of conversion, but the acknowledgement of love. This moment in Jesus' life reassures him that everything he does from this point forward in making God's Kingdom a reality, he does not do alone. This is what makes John's prophetic words about Jesus baptizing with the Spirit so true; the mission of Jesus is not simply to convert hearts but to establish a relationship in which his followers believe themselves to be beloved by God. S. W.