

Baptism of the Lord

On a windy morning this week one of the decorative finials from the front of the cathedral unexpectedly crashed onto the porch. There were no injuries, thank God. We are investigating proper repair, insurance claims, personal safety and the beauty of our building. The facade has remained intact since the 1880s, so we are grateful to the original workers who built it so skillfully. They inspire us as we prepare for a capital campaign to improve the rest of our property to the east.

Sometimes things you're just not expecting happen anyway. Today's feast provides another example. John called people to his baptism of repentance, and told them to anticipate a prophet greater than him. No one expected that that prophet would request baptism from John. But it happened anyway as a heavenly voice proclaimed that Jesus was God's beloved Son. In the past, the Catholic Church celebrated this day on a weekday more than a Sunday. The Church has always felt a little awkward about this event because we know baptism as the sacrament that cleanses from sin, and we believe that Jesus had no sin. We have to be careful not to layer our understanding of Christian baptism onto the action that John performed. Christian baptism was inspired by John's, but it is not the same. Besides, Jesus' baptism became something even more than what John offered. The Holy Spirit anointed him and sent him on mission. All four gospels mention this baptism, each describing it with increasing care. Acts of the Apostles also mentions John's baptism three times (1:22, 11:16), including today's second reading, which says that Jesus' ministry began "in Galilee after the baptism that John preached." With all this testimony in the New Testament, it's indisputable that John baptized Jesus. It just wasn't what people were expecting, so we have to deal with it.

The context for today's passage from Acts was another event that people were not expecting. Up to this point in the story, the primary followers of Jesus were all Jews. But increasingly the Gentiles were showing some interest. In Acts chapter 10 Peter goes to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile Centurion who had heard about Jesus. Cornelius had sent representatives to summon Peter to explain who Jesus was. Peter was not expecting that his experiences or his preaching would ever resonate in the ears of Gentiles, but it was happening. Then, as this episode continues beyond the verses we heard today, something totally unexpected took place. The Holy Spirit fell upon the household of Cornelius in another Pentecost. These Gentiles started speaking in tongues. Gentiles were filled with the Holy Spirit before they were even baptized. Peter must have been completely confused. He must have wanted to tell the Holy Spirit, "Look, you can't do this yet. We're not ready." But God was, so Peter shrugged it off and said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the holy Spirit even as we have?" It didn't fit the rule book, but it was happening, so they went with it.

Sometimes things you're just not expecting happen anyway. They may take place in world events, the relationships within your family, or the facade of a cathedral. Often these events do not fit what we think is for the good - like the baptism of Jesus or the conversion of Gentiles. But they happen, so we deal with it. We accept the unexpected to find the amazing ways that God is at work.

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