

Americans have a very strange baptismal ritual that takes place at the end of a championship football game. Just as the winning coach is feeling mighty proud of the way his team has performed, two athletes, no matter how cold it is outside, lift a full cooler and empty the contents over the coach's head. We haven't seen this in Kansas City in a little while. It's a strange way of making the point, but it sets the coach aside as the leader of leaders; it baptizes him into a new status.

If coolers had been around in the first century, John the Baptist could have used one very appropriately for the baptism of Jesus. Jesus is baptized into a new status. In fact, in the Acts of the Apostles, Peter calls Jesus' baptism an anointing; he says God anointed him in the Spirit. John the Baptist did not use oil either, but this baptism called to mind an image from the Old Testament. Priests, prophets, and kings began their calling by being anointed. As Jesus began his special mission, the baptism which set him apart seemed like an anointing.

At our baptism, we actually do receive a physical anointing. It signifies the same thing; it calls us to our task. Like a priest, we are all anointed to bring prayers before God. Like a prophet, we are anointed to proclaim God's word back to the people. And like royalty, we are given authority to guide our community. In our daily lives oil signifies many things: Perfume pleases people around us. Lotion comforts our hands when they grow stiff in the winter. Oil sets us apart and makes us useful.

The baptism of the Lord is like the baptism of a coach; it signifies accomplishment and destiny. In Jesus God has accomplished salvation; in his destiny, he will conquer evil. Our baptism signifies the same; it is already an accomplishment, no matter how old we are, because it shows that God has accomplished salvation in us. But it also signifies our destiny; it is our duty to continue God's saving work, to continue leading like the champions we are. As priests we pray, as prophets we proclaim God's word, and as royalty we guide the community to life.