

## **The Baptism of the Lord (The First Sunday after Epiphany)**

**Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Matthew 3:13-17; Acts 10:34-43**

**Isaiah 42:1-9** is the first of four “Servant Songs” in the book of Isaiah (the others being 49:1-6; 50:4-9 and 52:13—53:12). This song, which introduces the concept of “the Servant” to Israel, concentrates upon the chosenness of this one, and is obviously spoken by God.

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in which my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth and the coastlands wait for his teaching” (42:1-4).

We learn a great deal about the Servant from this passage. First, he is chosen by God. Just as Israel is “the chosen people”, Jerusalem is God’s “chosen city” and specific individuals in Israel such as Moses, David and Jeremiah are chosen for God’s purposes, so the Servant is one who is chosen by God.

Second, the Servant is chosen for mission. Being “chosen” is not an honor; it is an obligation. One is chosen (whether a nation, a city or an individual) to serve God by serving humanity in a particular way. This is stated quite clearly in this Servant Song that makes up the Old Testament lesson for this day. The phrase stated in this translation as “in which my soul delights” or in other translations as “in whom I am well pleased” means much more in Hebrew than that God takes pleasure in the Servant. The phrase is meant to stand in parallel with the earlier “whom I uphold” (or, in other translations, “whom I hold fast”). It has the sense of being dedicated to a particular mission or task, and it is the Servant’s single-minded devotion and commitment to the accomplishment of that task “in which (God’s) soul delights”! The Servant is chosen to carry out a specific mission assigned to him by God, and God provides for that Servant “my spirit” (or charism) which will empower and sustain the Servant as he seeks to faithfully carry out that mission.

Third, the Servant’s mission is one of bringing about justice for all the nations of the world. The task of the Servant is to work for justice. This is stated three times in the Song. “He will bring forth justice to the nations” (vs. 1b). “He will faithfully bring forth justice” (vs. 3b). “He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth” (vs. 4a). This is clearly the dominant theme in the Song. The work of the Servant is the work of justice. The Hebrew word used here in all three instances is “*mishpat*”. “Mishpat” is the carefully weighed and considered ruling of a judge based upon the “Torah” that is designed to guarantee an equitable protection of the rights, privileges and the obligations of each person in Israel (whether rich or poor, whether an Israelite or an “alien”). Thus, the author of this Servant Song is saying that the Servant will administer the distribution of justice so that all people, no matter their rank, position, power or wealth, will be treated equitably so that wealth is equally distributed among all and the law is administered objectively.

What is particularly intriguing is that this Song presents how the Servant will practice “mishpat”. The author writes, “he will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street”. That is, the Servant will not “talk” justice; he will “do” justice! He will not loudly proclaim by word or by symbolic gesture (especially in the Temple) his commitment to justice; in fact, he will rarely speak of it at all. He will simply do justice in all that he does. Those who have to talk about doing justice all the time or symbolically show themselves acting justly are likely not centering their work on acting justly but are rather making an occasion of it! As the old southern spiritual puts it, “Everybody talking about heaven ain’t necessarily going there!”

Likewise, the Servant will not impose his will upon the people he serves; he will not be a unilateral ruler, dominating the people and forcing his will upon them. This is beautifully stated in the symbolic words, “a bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench”. “A bruised reed” or “dimly burning wick” are terms occasionally used in both the Hebrew Bible and in other ancient literature for the poor and oppressed. So the author is telling us that the Servant “will not break” those who are already “bruised reeds” or “quench” those who are already only “dimly burning wicks”, hardly lit at all. Thus, he will not force his will down upon the people, but will rather work for justice for the poor, the powerless, the marginalized, the alienated and the oppressed.

Finally, it is intriguing to note in this segment on the Servant’s vocation of championing and liberating the poor and oppressed that the author is not saying that this is an exclusive role the servant plays with Israel. Rather, the Servant’s public goes far beyond the chosen people. He is to “bring forth justice *to the nations!*” He is to “establish justice in the earth”, so that “the coastlands wait for his teaching”. The work that the Servant is to do is to bring justice for the poor and oppressed throughout the world and in all nations. This is a departure from the long-term mission of God’s chosen as presented elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, for that mission had always focused upon bringing justice and equity only to Israel. But here, in this song, that mission is expanded to cover all the nations of the world. That is the mission to which God has called the Servant.

The author of this first Servant song ends it with a response, spoken by himself but also, hopefully, by those who would embrace the mission of the Servant. The song ends: “Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness. I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them” (42:5-9).

This response reminds us that it is God who is the creator of the heavens and the earth, the one “who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it”. In this passage, God speaks to his Servant, reminding him that God has “taken you by the hand and kept you”, that God has “made you a light to the nations” so that the Servant might heal the blind, set free the prisoner and liberate “those who sit in darkness”. That is the assignment of the Servant. But that

work of liberation and justice that the Servant will do, he does in the name and under the authority of God. For it is God who must receive the praise for the transformation of the world, and not the Servant who is God's instrument in bringing about that transformation. "I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other!" Through God's choice and call of the Servant to this mission of justice, God has begun to do a new thing that will radically change the future of the world; "before they spring forth, I tell you of them"! So get ready, and join God's program! Join the cause of the Servant, and begin work in concert with God to make this world the world as God intends it to be!

This is the first of the four Servant Songs. And, of course, it begs the question, "Who is the Servant?" That is not a simple question to answer. In the second Servant Song, the hymn directly states that Israel is the servant (49:6). And that conforms with other references in the prophecy of Isaiah to Israel as the servant (41:8-9; 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3). Yet, elsewhere, Isaiah makes it sound like the Servant is part of Israel and is yet distinct from Israel; one who is "bone of Israel's bone" and yet stands over against Israel and calls it to accountability (49:5-6; 50:4-9; 52:13—53:12). In another part of the prophecy of Isaiah, Moses is named as the servant (63:11). Of course, the early church saw the Servant as being Jesus himself. Thus, a portion of Isaiah 42:1 is directly quoted (along with Psalm 2:7) in Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, identifying him directly with the Servant (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; 9:7; Luke 3:22; 9:35; II Pet. 1:17).

So who is the Servant? Is it Israel? Is it a portion or remnant of Israel, those who remain faithful to the Torah? Is it Moses? Is it Jesus? Or is it all of these at various times in God's revelation of God's self, when God calls upon God's people to "act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God"? When we stand for justice, particularly for the poor and powerless, are all of us in at least to a small degree acting in the tradition of God's Servant, and being faithful to that mission to which we are all called and which is modeled for us in the likes of Jesus, Moses and Israel?

**Psalm 29** is built around the well-known refrain, "and God said and it was so" (Genesis 1). Psalm 29 describes God in the midst of a mighty storm, using the storm's characteristics as a way of demonstrating the very character of God.

Seven times in this psalm, its author declares "the voice of the Lord" and then an action that occurs out of that spoken word. Thus, the psalmist calls the people to worship God and then describes why they should worship God.

"Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in holy splendor" (vss. 1-2). But why should heavenly hosts and the people of God worship God and stand in awe before him? The Psalmist tells us.

"The voice of the Lord is over the waters" (vs. 3a), "the voice of the Lord is powerful" (vs. 4a), "the voice of the Lord is full of majesty" (vs. 4b), "the voice of the Lord breaks the cedars" (vs. 5a), "the voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire" (vs. 7), "the voice of the Lord shakes the

wilderness” (vs. 8a), “the voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl and strips the forest bare” (vs. 9a).

The Psalmist is using a mighty storm as a vehicle for describing the creative and destructive power of Yahweh. He begins by describing the majesty and awe-inspiring nature of the storm as descriptive of the awe-inspiring nature of God. But he then goes on to examine the profound power of the storm and the God who controls and creates that storm as a metaphor to describe both the creative and judging power of God. The storm shakes and tears apart trees, it rattles the earth and even seems to cause earthquakes, its lightning sets fire, its thunder shakes the wilderness, the wind strips the leaves off the trees until they are bare. Seeing such power at work, “God’s people all say, ‘Glory’!”

The power of the storm is simply a very minor manifestation of the power of Israel’s God who, in reality, has the capacity to create an entire world and even a universe out of chaos. This is the God whom we worship, and this is the God with whom we must deal. Therefore, what can we say in the face of such power but to declare, “The Lord sits enthroned upon the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever. May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with shalom” (vss. 10-11)!

**Matthew 3:13-17** is Matthew’s version of the baptism of Jesus. It begins with a very simple and direct statement: “Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him” (3:13). The baptism account that then ensues consists of two acts. The first act is John’s protest and Jesus’ defense and rationale for being baptized (reported only by Matthew). The second is the result of his baptism.

Perhaps the place to begin with reflecting upon Jesus’ baptism is with surprise that Jesus gets baptized at all! What business does Jesus have getting baptized? After all, Matthew has made very clear that people were getting baptized by John “in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (3:6b). In fact, John refused baptism to the Pharisees and Sadducees precisely because they would not confess their sins and refused to perceive how their actions were exploiting and oppressing the people (vss. 7-10). Why then was Jesus getting baptized, for the gospel writers contended that Jesus was sinless?

In fact, John protested that getting baptized was an unseemly thing for Jesus to do! “John would have prevented him,” Matthew wrote, “saying “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me”? But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness”. Then he consented” (vss. 14-15). What Jesus meant by “it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness”, we will examine later in this commentary. But what I want to highlight at this point was that John saw Jesus’ submission to baptism as being inappropriate.

So, we should be surprised that Jesus sought baptism from John. Matthew wants us to be scandalized at Jesus behavior here. But Jesus wished to be baptized by John, not for the forgiveness of his sins, but for his desire to be in solidarity with the people!

This is Jesus' first adult act in the Gospel of Matthew! Up until this point, he has been a child. But now we see Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry. And that beginning is for him to join with the human race in solidarity with them in the waters of sorrow, repentance and forgiveness. "Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient" (Phil. 2:6-8a).

What we see at the very opening of Jesus' ministry is his modeling what that ministry is going to be like, all the way to the cross! The first thing he does is to go with humanity down into the waters of baptism. And the remainder of his ministry is to be conducted as humbly as it began, identifying with people, being at-one with them, loving and caring for them and working for both their transformation and the transformation of their society into the world as God intended it to be – and, as a result, facing punishment and crucifixion. Just as Jesus ended his life on a cross between two thieves, so Jesus began his ministry in a river with sinners! Here – in real life and in real time – is God's Servant at work to liberate and redeem the world. Let us sing of this Servant!

But why did Jesus choose baptism as the symbol of his service of God through his servanthood to humanity? He states his reason quite clearly to John's protest. "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (vs. 15). What did Jesus mean by this statement?

We who speak English as our primary language have difficulty in understanding what Jesus meant by this response to John. And the difficulty lies in the associations we bring to the word, "righteousness". To be righteous, in the English language, is to be morally right or correct and thus free from any guilt or sin. In slang, it has the sense of being very, very correct, and therefore trustworthy. Consequently, it can have a certain priggish or judgmental nuance to it ("you just don't measure up").

To the Jewish people during the lifetime of Jesus, however, the word "righteousness" had a profoundly different nuance to it. "Righteousness" to any Jew, was a synonym for "justice". There were two Hebrew words for "justice" – "mishpat", which meant judicial justice; "tsedeq", which meant the ethical or moral dimensions of justice. The Greek word used by Matthew in this passage – *dikaioisune* – is the Greek translation for "tsedeq". Therefore, what Jesus was actually saying to John was "My baptism is the symbol of the inauguration of God's kingdom, which will be a kingdom of justice for the poor and oppressed. My participation in baptism is the signal that I will now be living out in my life what it means to be in God's kingdom, to be totally dedicated and focused upon doing the will of God (which is, by definition, to work for a just political order, an equitable economic order so that poverty would be eliminated and a spiritual order in which all people are in a loving relationship with God and one another)." That is what it means "to fulfill all righteousness". And God's sign that this was so was the descent of the dove upon Jesus and God's words, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (vss. 16, 17). Baptism was necessary to inaugurate the Kingdom of God and, consequently, Jesus' ministry.

What are the results of Jesus' baptism? Matthew tells us in the second half of the Gospel lesson for today. "And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased"" (vss. 16-17).

God responds to Jesus' act of identification with the people, humbling himself and declaring the inauguration of God's kingdom to a people dominated and oppressed by a human kingdom of power, greed and control. God responds to this act of self-giving with an act that declares God's love and approval of Jesus. And God's act is both an act of symbol and of speech.

The act of symbol is for the Spirit of God to descend upon Jesus "like a dove and alighting on him". The assumption of the text is that people could see this dove come out of the heavens and settle upon Jesus.

To the Jewish people, the symbol of the dove was pregnant with meaning. In the creation narrative, the Spirit of God "hovered (as a dove) over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2) as God began the creation. It was a dove that gave indication to Noah that the flooded earth was once again returning to dry land (Gen. 8:8-12). Thus the dove was symbolic of the new creation of the world as well as its original creation. It was doves that were acceptable as sacrifices to God as bird offerings in Temple worship. And, consequently, it was a dove that symbolized both to Jesus and to all who had attended his baptism that the Spirit of God had descended upon this newly-baptized man!

F. Dale Bruner puts well the significance of this symbolism, when he wrote, "The Spirit comes down like a dove. The remarkable office of the Spirit is to nuance strength, to modulate power, and to deliver what is deeply needed in common and public life – the way of gentleness. That the Christian Spirit is identified with a dove should have world-historical significance. When the church grasps even a portion of the gospel's downward and dovelike message – theologically (the humility of God's grace) and ethically (gentleness, nonviolence) – the church will be in a stronger position than she now is under a frequently nationalistic and so inevitably militaristic spirit. Christians are given power by the gift of the Spirit in baptism. But it is *dove* power".<sup>1</sup>

But besides symbol, there is also the word, "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (vs. 17). God speaks – only one of two times that God actually speaks in the Gospel of Matthew so that others may hear. And in both instances, God says exactly the same thing: "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (the other instance is Matthew's account of the transfiguration – Matt. 17:1-13).

This testimony by God as to Jesus' person and relationship with God is a slight adaptation of Isaiah 42:1, our Old Testament lesson for today (cf. Ex. 4:22; Psalm 2:7). It is meant to draw one back to that prophecy of the Servant, recognizing that here – in Jesus – is God's "chosen in whom my soul delights" – the one who will become "a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" (Isaiah 42:6b-7).

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<sup>1</sup> F. Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 110.

This One, God declares, is God's priceless son, the One with whom God is deeply pleased. And God is pleased, not only because this is "flesh of God's flesh and bone of God's bone", but because this Son is the one who accepts and in fact initiates a baptism that commits him to the role of a servant who, with "dove power", will take up God's work of justice, compassion, liberation and redemption so that the world can become what God ordained it to be. Therefore, in a most profound sense, the baptism of Jesus is the ordination of Jesus to his mission as he receives the benediction of God Himself to bring a people from the margins of life to which they have been confined and into the center of God's will for all society.

In one sense, Jesus never needed baptism, for he was no sinner in need of forgiveness. But as Jesus took on baptism much as he took on death, he took on that baptism on our behalf so that we, too, might become the beloved with whom God could be well pleased. As Henri Nouwen so sensitively wrote to a friend who couldn't see himself as beloved at all, "We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends loved or wounded us. That's the truth spoken by the voice that says to us, "You are my Beloved. I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me. We are one".<sup>2</sup> For the truth is, these are not words exclusively to Christ, but because of Christ and his work in both our interior and our public lives, they are words meant for us as well!

**Acts 10:34-43** is a portion of the story of the conversion of Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort of the Roman army, along with others ("the Gentiles" – vs. 45) of Cornelius' household and party. The entire story is significant (10:1-48), because this is the first conversion of a Gentile, and thus created the precedent of taking the gospel to those who were not Jews. Before this event, Christianity was entirely a reform movement within Judaism; after it, Christianity had become its own religion reaching out to convert the Gentile world. It fell to Peter, the head of the infant church and its symbolic leader, to lead this transition by proclaiming the gospel to Cornelius.

The story begins with Peter having a dream in which God commands him to eat animals that are ruled as unclean within the Jewish Law. Peter refuses, and God says to him, "What God has made clean, you must not call unclean" (i.e., Gentiles) (10:1-16). Peter then receives the envoy from Cornelius and, motivated by his dream, travels to the city of Caesarea to share the gospel with this Gentile man and his household (vss. 16-43). Having shared the gospel, Peter and the Christian party with him is astonished to see the Holy Spirit fall upon these Gentiles (vss. 44-46). Faced with overwhelming proof of God's acceptance of these Gentiles, Peter declares to the

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<sup>2</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 30-31.

Christian party with him, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (vs. 47)? So the story concludes, “So Peter ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days” (vs. 48).

The portion of this story that is the Epistle Lesson for today is the account of the actual witness Peter gave to the gospel. He proclaims to Cornelius and his household, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (vss. 34-43).

This was the gospel that Peter shared with Cornelius. And it was upon this sharing of the gospel that Cornelius and his household were filled with the Holy Spirit, manifested the Spirit’s gifts, and received baptism, thus being added to the family of faith!

Peter’s testimony to Cornelius begins in a most unusual and rather poignant way. He opens with the words, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (vs. 35). However, the Greek that is translated “shows no partiality” is literally “one who lifts faces” (“*prosopole mptes*”), so that he is saying “I truly understand that God is one who lifts faces”. What does Peter mean by this apparently-strange statement?

In the ancient Near East, it was common for a supplicant to prostrate himself or to bow his body and face before a king. “Lifting the face” was a ceremony performed by a king who would literally bend over and lift the face of the person who was doing him obeisance, so that the supplicant was looking directly into the eyes of the king. It was, consequently, the most emotive way of expressing the compassion and kindness of a ruler who was favoring the supplicant and would grant him his wish by “lifting his face”.

It was particularly poignant that Peter would have chosen to use this expression when speaking to Cornelius. He would have known that, as a senior officer in the “Italian Cohort”, Cornelius would have occasionally witnessed the Roman emperor performing this act of kindness to his subjects. So for Peter to use that phrase in this context was to be proclaiming to Cornelius that Peter, as a Jew, believed that God was “lifting up the face” of Gentiles like Cornelius and was welcoming them into the household of faith. After all, Peter had earlier said to Cornelius, “You know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile” (vs. 28). But now he



was proclaiming to the centurion that God would not so exclude, but would rather favor a Gentile as much as God would any Jew. Consequently, neither would Peter exclude!

Peter then goes on to share a summarization of the gospel. What Peter presents is quite similar to the way the gospel is proclaimed throughout the entirety of the early part of the book of Acts. He begins by summarizing the faith – “(God) sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all” (vs. 36). By “peace” (Hebrew: “*shalom*”), Peter of course means what the Jewish people meant by that word – not simply a wish of well-being but rather of all of public and private life centered in relationship with God that was acted out through the practice of justice for all and the sharing of wealth in order to eliminate poverty. For Jesus to be “Lord of all” meant that Jesus had acted to bring human society (both humanity as a whole and each individual person) under the rulership of God that expressed itself spiritually, relationally, politically and economically. But how did Jesus accomplish that saving act? The remainder of Peter’s testimony gives witness to Jesus’ action.

“(God’s) message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead” (vss. 37-42).

In other words, what Peter did was that he simply told the story about Jesus’ ministry. Beginning with Jesus’ baptism and ending with his resurrection and commissioning of his followers to be witnesses of him, Peter tells the story of what happened to Jesus. He presents no theological lessons, no theory of the atonement, no arguments or apologetics for becoming a Christian. He simply tells the story of Jesus life, ministry, death and resurrection, and in that light, makes his appeal to Cornelius to “believe in him and receive forgiveness of sins through his name”. And Cornelius does so believe and receives such forgiveness, which is testified to by his receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, because he is already obviously chosen by God for inclusion in the church, Cornelius is received into the church and formalized into the Christian faith by the celebration of the sacrament of baptism. Thus, the first Gentiles enter into the church and Christianity begins to move from a reform effort within Judaism to the worldwide religion that it would become and in which we who are both Jews and Gentiles have been baptized!

The prayer for the Feast Day of the Baptism of the Lord (the First Sunday after Epiphany) is an appropriate prayer with which to end our reflection on these three scripture lessons of the day. This prayer appears in the *Gothic Missal*, an ancient worship book of the Goths that ordered their daily worship.

“O God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ our Lord has endowed the regenerating waters with the grace which hallows unto eternal salvation; and did yourself come on him by your Spirit, in the descent of the mysterious Dove on his head; grant, we ask you, that

there may come on your whole church a blessing which may keep us all continually safe, may unceasingly bless all classes of your servants, may direct the course of those who follow you and open the door of your kingdom to all who are waiting to enter; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Ancient Christian Devotional* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2007), p. 46.