

Tear open the veil of heaven, O God, and speak to us as beloved daughters and sons, enabling us to hear and believe the Good News of your Word, made flesh among us and within us.

As the Second Book of Kings opens, King Ahaziah has fallen from a second-story window and has sent to consult the god of the neighboring kingdom of Ekron, to find out if he will survive his injuries. God promptly contacts Elijah, directing him to intercept Ahaziah's messengers and confront Ahaziah with the word of the Lord: "Why did you send messengers to Ekron's God? Is it because there is no god in Israel whose word you could seek?"

The messengers return without an answer from Ekron and when the king wants to know why, they repeat Elijah's prophecy, including the news that the king will not survive his injuries. When Ahaziah asks for a description, they say "He wore clothes made of hair, with a leather belt around his waist." And Ahaziah immediately knows that he's dealing with Elijah the Tishbite.

The very last words of the Hebrew Scriptures promise the return of Elijah: "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse." (Malachi 4:5-6)

So once again, there appears in the wilderness near Jerusalem, a prophet dressed in camel skin, with a leather belt around his waist, living on a subsistence diet, calling

people to repentance and baptizing them for the forgiveness of sins.

John explicitly denies that he is Elijah returned to earth, but by the miraculous nature of his birth and by his appearance and style he is an Old-Covenant figure who has come to announce the dawning of the New. His is there to announce the arrival of One greater than he, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

The pattern we have observed throughout Matthew's and Luke's narratives of the birth of Jesus, bypassing palace and temple to announce the Good News to shepherds and astrologers, continues, as people from all over the countryside of Judaea and all the people of Jerusalem, bypass the Temple with its established rituals and its authorized procedures for dealing with sin, to seek God's forgiveness and renewal in the fresh, uncharted territory outside of town, following the "voice in the wilderness" who called them to repentance and offered washing away of sin through baptism.

John the Baptist did not invent the rite of baptism. The Law of Moses contained hundreds of regulations regarding ritual purity, many of which required full immersion either in running water, or in a ritually-correct bath with a direct natural source. These installations and the customs surrounding them remain a prominent feature of Orthodox and Conservative Judaism to this day. The baptism performed by John in the wilderness, in the living waters of the Jordan River, would have been quite familiar, and would have adequately answered the requirements of the Law, if not the meticulous fussiness of the Temple authorities.

All four Evangelists are scrupulous about getting Jesus baptized without the least hint that it was in any way necessary *for him*. Matthew, in fact, has John argue with Jesus about who should be baptizing whom, and Mark and Luke simply state the fact as succinctly as they can. John avoids mention of Jesus' actual baptism, placing the news of the Spirit descending like a dove in the mouth of the Baptist: 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.' (John 1:32-34).

Our Catechism asserts that the Sacraments were "given by Christ as a sure and certain means by which we receive" the inward and spiritual grace bestowed by the outward and visible sign of baptismal waters. (BCP page 857) It was at the moment when Jesus entered the Jordan River in the company of sinners that he ordained it as a Sacrament of the Gospel, the Sacrament of New Birth. By immersing himself in waters in which the sins of others have been washed away, Jesus assumes solidarity with all of sinful humanity; thus he takes the sins of the whole world to the Cross. This is an important dimension of the Incarnation.

Added to John's emphasis on repentance and the washing away of sin, which remains at the heart of baptism, is the richness of grace signified in the other events that occurred on the banks of the Jordan as Jesus came up out of the water.

As Jesus joins us at the Jordan in our sinful baptismal waters, so we are united with him in the affirmation that follows on Jordan's banks. With Jesus we are brought into God's family, claimed and affirmed as God's beloved daughters and sons.

As the Spirit who hovered over Creation came to rest on Jesus in the form of a dove, the Holy Spirit is awakened in our lives in baptism, creating and recreating us in the image of God, and empowering us for ministry.

On behalf of God's people languishing in exile, unable to sing the songs of Zion in an alien land, Isaiah cries out: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" Now God does precisely that. The Greek word appears twice in Mark's Gospel—here, when God splits the heavens open to reveal Jesus as the beloved Son of God and to allow the Holy Spirit to descend on him; and again as Jesus dies on the Cross and the veil of the Temple is torn in half from top to bottom. In both cases the separation between heaven and earth is breached. The heavens are ripped open as God in Christ assumes our humanity. The veil of the Temple, the curtain separating the most holy place from the outer courts, the sacred from the profane, is ripped apart as Jesus defeats the power of evil precisely by succumbing to it. As we are buried with Christ in his death at our baptism, we rise with him to new life. We share in his victory over the power of sin and death, for this life and into eternity. We can still experience these "thin places" in time and space.

Baptism reminds us that God loves each and every one of us with a love that is without limit. That, as St. Paul reminds us,

(Rom. 8:39) there is “nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God [which is ours] in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

But in Baptism we also commissioned for discipleship. Adults make the promises for themselves. If you were baptized as a child too young to speak for yourself or even remember, your sponsors, parents and godparents, joined with God’s larger family, the Church, in a commitment to see that those promises were incorporated into your upbringing. If there were baptisms to be performed, we would proceed with them now. There being none, We continue with the renewal of our baptismal vows.