

Baptism & Science

Homily by Deacon Edward Sanchez, Archdiocese of Milwaukee

On the Readings for the Baptism of the Lord, January 13, 2019

"I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." In these words of John the Baptist, we hear the Baptist testify to the power of the coming Messiah. The Baptist proclaimed many things: he called for repentance, he proclaimed the importance of moral living, and condemned those who (like Herod and his wife) dismissed the moral law of God. But most of all, the Baptist proclaimed the coming of a Person. He promised that there would come a Messiah, a man who would give us new life, who would lead us out of slavery in all of its forms. And as Christians, we know that the person whom John the Baptist promised did indeed come: Jesus of Nazareth. And it is his baptism, the baptism of Jesus Christ, which does give us new life, which brings about real interior renewal.

But what is the meaning of the baptism of Jesus Christ? Is it a one-time thing, something that happens once and then it's over? Or is it an ongoing reality, telling us something about how to live our life? As we think about this, first let's notice that the Church Fathers said that this new life does not belong just to humans but also, in a sense, to all of creation. These early Christians (Ignatius of Antioch, Ambrose, and Maximus of Turin) pointed out that in Jesus' baptism, he purified the water and made water itself capable of supernatural effects: "Christ is baptized, not that he may be sanctified in the waters, but that he himself may sanctify the waters, and by his own purification may purify those streams which he touches" (Maximus of Turin). Thus Jesus' baptism renews all the waters of the earth, so that wherever water is present, there it is possible to be baptized and brought into communion with Christ's Church. For the early Christians, Jesus' baptism brought about new life not just for humans, but for all of nature.

But how does new life "in nature" come about? How has new life arrived in the past? We can even ask: where did all the water on the earth come from? The answer may surprise you. Over the roughly 4 billion years that our earth and solar system have

existed, the planets have been pounded, over and over, with asteroids. If you look up at the moon and see the countless craters, you can see the footprints which thousands of pieces of rock, ice, and other space junk have left. And the earth has been pounded over and over with such objects as well. It may seem brutal, from the earth's perspective, to get beat on like that.

And yet, it is this pounding that made possible, here on earth, a new life.

That is because many of these asteroids were made of ice. They contained water. They hit the earth, broke apart, and melted. And unlike the moon, our atmosphere was strong enough to keep the water in liquid form, and over the millions of years, the asteroids struck in such large numbers that now earth has huge oceans. And in those oceans, formed life, and from that life, we have been born. It's a type of "baptism with fire and the Holy Spirit" as you see these meteorites and asteroids, flaming in the atmosphere and then depositing the life-giving water on the surface of the earth.

Why do I share this today? Because if you picture yourself on the earth three billion years ago, it would have been terrifying. Asteroids flaming in the atmosphere, striking the earth with incredible force over and over. From fire to a lake covered with smoke and debris. You might have been tempted to call out to God and ask Him why. Why are we going through all this? Why now? Why me? But in the midst of this chaos - in fact, through this chaos - God was preparing new life. God's gift of water made life on earth possible, but it did not happen easily.

The new life that we receive in Baptism was not free. Jesus suffered on the cross, died, and rose again to gain a new life for us. He was scourged, receiving those beatings, over and over, but he chose to accept them. He chose to accept them in order to satisfy the demands of justice and show God's merciful love for us.

And it's not free for us either. When we are baptized, with this water that arrived on earth through the pounding of a thousand asteroids, with this water that Jesus' own baptism sanctified, we are baptized into his death and resurrection. We must be prepared to suffer with him, to participate in the Paschal Mystery of his death and resurrection, to live out both sacrifice and joy in our own bodies. That is the reality that John the Baptist pointed to as he called for repentance and proclaimed Jesus as the Lamb of God. That is

the culmination of Jesus' public ministry which starts today. And that is what our baptism means for us here and now. As we celebrate this Mass, let us thank him for his baptism, for his suffering and his resurrection, for our own baptism, and for the trials through which he gives us new life.