

Marked for a purpose: Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

by [Kathleen Norris](#) in the [December 25, 2007](#) issue

Several years ago I was invited to preach on this gospel passage from Matthew at the National Cathedral on the Sunday designated to honor the state of Hawaii. I struggled with the subject of Jesus' baptism, partly because baptism is not an easy concept to explain, and this story seemed strange indeed. Why would Jesus insist on being baptized by John, and what could it mean that as John was baptizing him in the Jordan the voice of God spoke from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased"?

I suspect that to many Christians baptism seems a curious and antiquated custom. People want their children baptized but can't say much about why they want it, and what the rite is meant to signify. Many adults who attend church faithfully nevertheless would be hard-pressed to say what their baptism means to them. It might help to remember that in the early church the baptism of Jesus was a much more important feast than Christmas. Now that Christmas has become the year's biggest marketing machine, we may count that as a good thing: imagine John the Baptist in his animal skins as a singing plush doll.

But there are important reasons why Jesus' baptism was observed as one of three feasts of light, which include Epiphany, marking the wise men's recognition of the true nature of the Christ child, and the wedding feast at Cana, at which Jesus performed his first miracle. These are feasts of light because they illuminate God's nature. They are three occasions on which God chose to reveal an aspect of God made flesh, as incarnated in Jesus Christ. And they indicate that the incarnation is not only about Jesus but about us: these three feasts demonstrate to Christians not only what God is like but also who God wishes us to be.

Baptism, then, is about celebrating the incomparable gift we receive as creatures beloved of God. But baptism is also about more fully engaging the responsibility that this identity entails. The baptism of Jesus initiated his public ministry, which led him to the cross. For individual Christians, baptism is our call to the community of the church, which often provides us with crosses of our own to bear. Yet it is together, as church, that we are meant to witness to peace in a cruel and violent world and bring

a message of hope in the face of despair. Whatever the worldly powers may be—Roman rulers or contemporary dictators, corrupt lobbyists, arms traders and war profiteers—Christians are called to witness to another, greater power. Our baptisms mark us for this purpose.

Not long before I was to preach my sermon, East Asia was hit by a monstrous tsunami that caused death on an unimaginable scale. In Internet chat rooms I found many people coping with the tragedy by engaging in the all-American pursuits of bad science (concerning the tsunami's causes and effects) and bad theology (concerning the fate of the dead). A striking number of people asserted that most of the tsunami's victims were going to hell because they had not been baptized. I guess this is what you can expect when you apply self-serving human logic to a divine mystery. Baptism is a blessing, not a bludgeon. It is a sacrament, not a weapon of mass destruction. Baptism's import is so much larger than Christians generally acknowledge when they say, "I was baptized a Catholic," or an Episcopalian, or a Methodist. A Christian is baptized into the Christian faith, and not a particular denomination. Baptism is that big. Today's readings in Isaiah and Acts offer us a glimpse of something bigger still: a God who is not limited by our understanding of baptism and what it signifies—a God who created humanity in the divine image and whose love for us is so great that it embraces all people, no exceptions. This God is beyond our understanding and our comfort zones.

One comfort zone that this Gospel story in particular can help pastors assault is that of biblical illiteracy. It provides a great opportunity to explore what Walter Brueggemann would call a "thick text," one that is dense with our history as a people of faith. I once heard Brueggemann speak on this Gospel passage, pointing out that in it Jesus reenacts the whole history of Israel. It is at the Jordan that Moses interprets the Torah, that Israel enters a land of freedom apart from "Pharaoh's production schemes," and that Elisha receives Elijah's spirit. When Jesus approaches John on the banks of the Jordan River all of this collective memory is put into play. And all of it will be recapitulated in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of the Son of God. The occasion of his baptism is so momentous that we are jolted all the way back to the first chapter of Genesis, as the separation of earth and sky that God established at creation is refigured. God breaks through in order to speak directly to human beings.

Brueggemann insisted that all of these memories and meanings are right there in the story. It is up to us to retrieve them and make them known, reaching not only

back into the Hebrew scriptures but looking ahead to the early church. The baptism of Jesus is the event that allows the story to go forward into the community of those who follow him and become his disciples, those who will be known as Christians. It is that big.