



Baptism of the Lord – Epiphanytide

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Scripture tells us that when Israel passed through the Red Sea, it happened at night. The waters were dark. The people could not see the far shore. They could not measure the depth or calculate the risk. What they could see was the pillar of fire moving ahead of them—lighting the path one step at a time. Salvation came not by remaining where they were, but by moving forward into unfamiliar territory, trusting the light that went before them.

That image matters, because the people of God have never been a people who remain stationary. From Abraham onward, we are a pilgrim people. We are always being called out, always being led forward, always being asked to trust God beyond what is familiar or secure.

Today, as the Church celebrates the Baptism of the Lord—the final great manifestation of Epiphany—that ancient night finds its fulfillment at the waters of the Jordan.

At first glance, the scene is unsettling. Jesus comes from Galilee to John to be baptized, and John resists: “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?” The objection is understandable. Why would the sinless One submit to a baptism meant for sinners? Why would the Holy One step into waters associated with repentance?

Saint Maximus of Turin gives the answer with striking clarity. Christ is baptized not to be made holy by the water, but to make the water holy. He enters the Jordan not to be cleansed, but to cleanse. Holiness does not rise up from the water toward Christ; Christ descends into the water and transforms it from within. By touching the waters, He consecrates them at their source, so that they may become the instrument of baptismal grace for all future generations.

This descent fulfills the prophecy we heard from Isaiah:

“I, the LORD, have called you for the victory of justice...  
I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people,  
a light for the nations,  
to open the eyes of the blind,  
to bring out prisoners from confinement,  
and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.”

At the Jordan, that prophecy becomes flesh. The beloved Son stands in the water as the covenant itself. He is the Light entering the place of darkness. He steps into the waters not because He is imprisoned by sin, but because He has come to lead prisoners out. He goes down into the depths so that the path through the depths might be made firm.

Saint Maximus helps us see this by returning to the Exodus. When Israel passed through the sea, the pillar of fire went first. It did not remove the water; it made a way through it. Saint Paul tells us that this passage was already a kind of baptism: the people were overshadowed by the cloud and brought through the waters into freedom.

But now, Saint Maximus says, the pillar has changed. No longer fire and cloud, but flesh and blood. Christ Himself is the pillar. In the column of His body, He passes through the waters first. He prepares the path. He strengthens the footsteps of faith for those who will follow.



This is why the heavens open when Jesus emerges from the Jordan. This is why the Spirit descends. This is why the Father's voice is heard: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." The direction of salvation history is revealed. The way forward is made visible.

And that way now includes us.

Your baptism was not a moment of arrival; it was a moment of departure. It marked the beginning of a journey. You were plunged into waters already sanctified by Christ and set on a path that leads beyond this world. You were given new bearings—no longer oriented toward comfort, familiarity, or self-preservation, but toward the Kingdom of God.

This is why the Church exists as the compass of culture. In a world that is constantly shifting—redefining truth, freedom, identity, and justice—the Church does not invent a new direction. She holds fast to the pillar. She keeps her eyes fixed on Christ and points steadily toward our eternal destination. She reminds us that we are not meant to stay where we are. We are meant to follow.

To be baptized is to accept that Christ will lead us into unfamiliar territory. He will ask us to trust Him when the far shore is not yet visible. He will call us forward when staying put feels safer. But He never asks us to go where He has not already gone.

As a pilgrim people, we cannot remain in Egypt. We cannot camp forever at the edge of the sea. We move when the pillar moves. We follow when Christ leads.

And so, as Epiphany draws to its close today, the light that once shone over Bethlehem and the light that burned in the pillar of fire now rests upon the waters of the Jordan—and upon us. Christ has gone before us. The path has been prepared. The waters have been sanctified.

I invite you to reclaim the grace of your baptism. Keep your bearings. Fix your eyes on Christ. Follow Him wherever He goes—even when the path leads through waters you do not yet understand—trusting that the One who leads us through the desert will also bring us safely to the other shore, the promised land of eternal life.