

**The Baptism of the Lord  
January 10, 2010  
4 pm and Noon Liturgies**

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**The Christmas season officially ends today. For weeks now we've heard again the wonderful stories of Christmas. We watched Mary and Elizabeth greeting each other with delight, and we heard them shout for joy as they praised this strange God of surprises. We heard Zechariah speak again for the first time in months. If you were very Ignatian in your prayer these days—or if you just paid attention carefully to the liturgies—you might even have heard the new baby cry, or felt the warmth of the animals gathered in the cave, or maybe even smelled them huddled together around a simple straw manger.**

**It might have seemed a very tender, and perhaps even familiar, small family portrait of a fragile new life inviting everyone present to hope again, to dream of possibilities again, to envision a brighter world—at least for their own small circle of friends and family.**

**But the beautiful Christmas stories don't stop there. Suddenly, we're told, the circle widens dramatically. Simple and**

very poor shepherds have an angelic visitation announcing to them impossible news. And even stranger people—and we're told wise ones—appear out of nowhere having seen their own visions in the heavens. All of a sudden, the little cave seems brimming full and very warm.

The circle is getting larger and larger and the movement is becoming more and more fast-paced and even spinning. And this is all no accident. Matthew and Luke knew exactly what they were painting. The circle of love around this Jesus of Nazareth keeps growing wider and wider and getting faster and faster. As does, of course, the circle of suspicion, as we will see as the gospel unfolds further—into so-called Ordinary Time.

This child is born to be far more than the usual delight to his family. He is born not just to them, not just to Galilee, nor just to Judea. Nor, indeed, he is born just for Israel. In today's celebration, the Baptism of Christ, that little circle's centrifugal force breaks free into a whole other dimension. As all the people are gathered together, the gospel tells us, suddenly—once again—the heavens are rent and the voice of God is heard already saying to Jesus: well done! You are truly my beloved, my Son.

**And I am delighted! Now, let the work begin! Let life be born again!**

**Today Jesus begins his public ministry. Today Jesus is given to the world. Today the battle for the Kingdom of God is enjoined. And it will be a strange and startling story, one that's been called "The Greatest Story Ever Told."**

**The bookends to the gospel story, our first two readings today, only serve to highlight and frame this marvelous event. Isaiah proclaims again the hope of all Israel. And he brings us back to the beginning of Advent. The themes are best heard sung out loud. And, behold, George Friedrich Handel has set not one, not two, but three of the earliest songs in his "Messiah" to the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah's prophesy. "Comfort ye my people." "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low." The Promise of Israel is upon us!**

**And in the marvelous and startling story of Peter and Cornelius from the Luke's Acts of the Apostles, Peter finds himself forced to confront just how wide that initial circle in Bethlehem**

has grown. If you remember the story, Peter is told in dream to eat unclean foods. He bluntly says no: I will not! Then he meets Cornelius and his family, Gentiles one and all. They all say: sit and eat! And once again Peter confesses: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." The God of Israel is for everyone.

The circle is reaching to the outer limits of the universe, it seems. And Peter is not alone, I'm afraid, in feeling very uncomfortable. This all-inclusive circle is taking him places he would really rather not go. The baby we adored only a few weeks ago in a manger truly belongs to all—not just to some.

At the Baptism of Jesus, the circle of life bursts ,almost out of control, it seems. And this is the Good News! So we can sing with the Psalmist: "O bless the Lord, my soul."

But I trust you can hear with me the invitation in the whirlwind. He is for all—as we must be for all—in order to truly follow Him.

Welcome back to an Ordinary Time that is, I'm afraid, anything but...ordinary. We now need to hear for ourselves, in our own hearts, with our own ears, God saying to us: *you* are my

**beloved, my daughter, my son. And I am delighted! Let the  
Kingdom begin again today! Let life begin anew. Peace!**