

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” BAPTISM OF THE LORD (B)  
Isaiah 42:1-4,6-7 Psalm 29 Acts 10:34-38 Mark 1: 7-11  
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Mark gets right down to business in his gospel. No infancy narrative as a prelude, rather, he begins with the life of the adult Jesus. As I write this, I am in New York with family on a post- Christmas visit. Maybe that explains why I am wondering: if Mark’s gospel were made into a Broadway musical (Lord knows, most of us couldn’t afford to go see it!) what would it be like? There would be no overture; the curtains would part, and the story begin immediately. Following the tone and pace of Mark’s story line, the music and narrative would be fast, with lots of action. Jesus would be moving constantly, followed by his hesitant and somewhat dense band of disciples. He would stop periodically, in his fast-paced journey to Jerusalem, to heal, perform miracles and teach; but he’d be soon on the move again. The disciples would have trouble keeping up with him and would not comprehend his teachings, their minds being elsewhere, contemplating glory and fame. The music for this stage production would be intense and staccato, with no time for slow ballads.

The curtain would have barely parted when John the Baptist would enter, drawing a large crowd to the Jordan to be baptized. His opening lines are quoted in today’s gospel, they point to the One coming after him. Mark doesn’t spend any time on formal introductions, (“It happened in those days....”)-----Jesus enters the scene, is baptized and moves on. His ministry has begun, and he is on a mission from God.

We remember Jesus’ baptism today; but we recall our own as well. I wonder if any of us know the date of our baptism? It is the most important spiritual event in our lives, it marks the beginning of our own journey narrative with Jesus. It opened the curtain for us and began our Christian story. Together we remember our baptism at this liturgy. It unites us as a community. Baptism reminds us that we need to look beneath the surface of our differences and appreciate our union in Christ. It calls us to express our care for one another today both in our prayer, but also in other concrete ways after we leave this place of worship. Baptism blends our prayers together for the needs of our damaged church, whose baptismal identity and credibility are wounded by scandal and deception. Baptism into Christ also reminds

us that we should not be insular and cut off from the larger world; but with Jesus, who on this day begins his ministry to the world, turn our attention to those beyond our church building and church affiliation.

Another New York institution comes to mind this season. (Excuse me if this all sounds so “New Yorkish.”) The Metropolitan Museum of Art has its annual Christmas tree on display. I love to go see it, a large tree with an elaborate creche. Besides the manger, with its figures of the Holy Family, shepherds, animals and angels, there are many figures around the tree’s base taken from 17<sup>th</sup>. and 18<sup>th</sup>. century Neapolitan daily life. The display always attracts solemn and respectful spectators for its religious significance, I am sure, but also for its beauty. Another attraction are the scenes around the base of the tree that include miniature villages and working people at their daily chores and celebrations. It’s a “Presepio” (the word means manger), and it communicates the spirituality of the nativity scene—Christ comes into the midst of our daily lives and routines. The scene invites us to look at what and who is close at hand for the presence of Christ, in our spouse, children, work and relationships. Jesus is intimately involved in our lives. We are reminded, by the display, that the Word was made flesh and that our world is holy; for God dwells in our midst.

Today’s baptismal story is connected to the manger, where God entered flesh and became one of us. At his baptism Jesus goes down into the waters or, as Joseph Donders puts it, he enters the mud with us. (See the quote below.) Privilege and power can remove political and religious leaders from the people they are called to serve. The common person can feel that his/her leaders live in a very different world. But Jesus enters the waters this day, comes up close to us and lets the waters that covered the repentant sinners flow over him. He takes what is weak and wavering, makes us his disciples and strengthens those who would follow him. From this point on Jesus’ main concern is the reign of God, his words and actions will reveal this reign to all who have the eyes and ears to perceive it in him. The one “mightier” than John will enable the baptized to call on the same Spirit that descended on Jesus at his baptism and with that Spirit give witness to the God who gives new life in baptismal waters.

I note that in Mark’s rendering of the baptism, the divine manifestations are not things seen or heard by the crowds. They are “seen” only by Jesus: “The heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him.” The voice from

heaven is spoken to Jesus, “YOU are my beloved Son...,” not “THIS is my beloved Son,” as it would be if addressed to the crowds. The reading suggests that baptism was a defining moment for Jesus. After he is baptized, Jesus “sees” and “hears” something unique. What he sees and hears will fire his life and direct his energies. Baptism is our defining moment too. Our baptism gives us a new “seeing and hearing.” It is as if our eyes are opened and our ears unplugged. Baptism involves water. Water is not a luxury we can do without; we die from thirst a lot sooner than from hunger. Water is a fitting symbol for God’s graciousness; God wants to give us a new way of seeing and hearing and it comes as a gift through our baptismal waters.

We just ended the Christmas season, and our baptismal eyes were sated. Even with a downturn in the economy, there were: too many gifts; unneeded clothes; expensive toys for kids who can’t find the time to play with them; new cars to replace ones that work quite well and on and on. Our ears, opened by our baptismal waters, have heard too much: threats of a double-front war in Korea and Iraq; casual obscenities during prime-time television; a key Senator revealing the racism that is still beneath the surface of our society; screaming hostile families on daytime television; our own family members speaking hard and unforgiving words at one another.

Recall the “Ephphatha (“be opened”) rite,” when the priest or deacon touches the ears of the baptized and says, “The Lord Jesus made the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith to the praise and glory of God the Father.” What Jesus “saw” and “heard” at his baptism, we “see and hear” at ours; we are called to look at the world in a new way and to hear God’s word spoken to us in our daily lives--- where the heavens are “torn open” and God made manifest to us.

The heavens have been “torn open.” Our baptismal identity opens our eyes: now there is no separation between us and God. God’s Spirit is upon each of us, gentle like a dove; but no less commissioning for us than for Jesus. When the white garment was placed on us we were called by our names and told, “N., you have become a new creation and have clothed yourself in Christ.” New creation---with newly created eyes so that we look for Christ in the gentle and meek, the poor and left out. With our baptismal eyes, we look in the mirror and see ourselves as gospel peacemakers in a hostile, grudge-bearing world; merciful to those asking for

forgiveness and mouth pieces for those who have no voice.

#### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

(One of our readers just recommended this book. I posted it last year, but here it is again.)

Joseph G. Donders, *PRAYING AND PREACHING THE SUNDAY GOSPEL*.  
(New York: Orbis Books, 1988)

Brief reflections on the Sunday readings for the three-year cycle. I like the sensitivity he shows to the justice message in the Gospels. His reflections are good meditations for both preacher and the person in the pew.

#### QUOTABLE:

In the year 1916, on a line of about seventeen miles, one million human beings killed one another over a period of eight months. That is an average rate of four thousand men killed each day. The mud of human evil is very deep. It stinks forcefully. It is full of dangerous gases. And there was Jesus in front of John, asking to be allowed to bend down in that mud. No wonder John hesitated. But Jesus went down, and when he came up, the mud still streaming from his ears, over his eyes, out of his hair, over his nose and mouth, heaven opened. A voice was heard. A Spirit, a new Spirit in people and a new heart were announced, glory, glory, alleluia.

He was bathed in light. He was drowned in God's voice. He was full of Spirit. What about the mud? Was he going to forget it? Was he going to overlook it in the new light? Was that Spirit going to cover up evil? Was she going to work as a kind of consoling anesthetic, a kind of opium, cocaine, ether, or chloroform? She was not. Once he got that Spirit, he was driven by her into the desert, and again out of the desert, to do his work in this world, to struggle with evil in us and in this world, in order to overcome it.

—Joseph G. Donders, *PRAYING AND PREACHING THE SUNDAY GOSPEL*,  
p. 90

#### ANNOUNCEMENTS:

I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be

happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

Our webpage address: <https://PreacherExchange.com> - (Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes these reflections and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,  
Jude Siciliano, OP  
[FrJude@JudeOP.org](mailto:FrJude@JudeOP.org)