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The Baptism of Our Lord
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Lectionary Year B: Mark 1:4-11

There's understandably a lot of longing for a distant past in which some of us may remember more stable and carefree times. We were happier then, so it seemed. One might observe, however, that there's some similarity between the present day and, say, fifty years ago. There was bloodshed in Southeast Asia and there was unrest on college campuses. But didn't it seem, in years past, like the bloodshed in particular was always "somewhere else"? Even as television brought the Vietnam War into the living rooms of millions of Americans, one could still remind oneself that these horrors were occurring halfway around the world.

I sincerely hope and pray that these "somewhere else" phenomena don't become everyday events on the home front. (Actually, it would be nice if they weren't everyday events anywhere!) Amazingly, we could for generations look on our halls of government and places of worship as peaceful places, largely due to the respect we automatically offered them. Maybe we might not be able to get back to those days completely, but at least we could look forward to something better than a dreadful, Twilight Zone-ish "new normal."

As all of you know, I'm a huge fan of classic rock music, and I've loved the music of Crosby, Stills, and Nash for years. C., S., and N.'s lyrics could be a bit juvenile and preachy, at times, but

from one of their "preachier" numbers I remember the refrain, "Teach your children well...their father's hell did slowly go by." If you look at the song as a whole, it definitely has a "think about the kind of world you'd want the next generation to live in" sort of vibe, which, I suppose, has almost become a songwriting cliché (particularly as very earnest "message songs" started dominating popular music in the Sixties). But the basic point of the song hasn't lost its impact, even now as it's fifty years old. To me, it says, "Remember not only the message but also the example by which you...teach your children."

Recently, I read that most humans become set in their ways around age thirty. Chances are, after that, any real change in your personality, perceptions, and tastes isn't going to happen. As that relates to we who are gathered here, the likelihood of any of us changing is pretty slim. But, as we know, children are highly impressionable and able to change sometimes overnight, depending upon who or what is influencing them. So, if we are to "teach [our] children well," as the song goes, what might be some ways to do that? Thinking back on the countless life lessons and values I received from my parents, I remember that consistency was key. Given how impressionable I was, I was never, for example, taught something at school or church only to have it undone or debunked by my parents at home. (Although, sometimes I wished they would've done some undoing and debunking.) And, as respect was paramount, how was I ever going to learn respect if my own parents were disrespectful of the institutions entrusted with my academic and spiritual formation?

"Teach your children well...", and we might look now at how life lessons and values from the Scriptures and the Church assume a role in this. On this feast of our Lord's Baptism, we remember how God officially claimed his Son in a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). While it would be heretical to say this of Jesus, we view our Baptisms into Christ as an adoption into God's family, and, as we think about what this means for (especially) our spiritual formation, we can see a consistent message of grace and love handed down to us from God the Father, to Jesus the Son, who is the Head of this family, the Church. And the same Spirit who descended upon Christ at his Baptism is the same Spirit who teaches us. The apostle Paul puts it this way: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). And it is not only in prayer but in all of life where we receive the Spirit's instruction and guidance.

Earlier in our text, John the Baptist makes it clear that the baptism he administers is of a preparatory nature -- one that gets everyone ready for the Savior who is to come. Then, John offers a little foreshadowing of what will happen in Christ; he says, "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8). Again, we move from Christ to Spirit; indeed, Christ sent the Spirit following his return to God the Father so that the generations thereafter (down to us!) would never walk alone. The Spirit teaches. The Spirit intercedes. The Spirit accompanies. The Spirit advocates. Evidence of this

can be found in Acts 2 in the account of the Day of Pentecost, which is the "birthday of the Church." There, the Spirit gathered people from all over the known world and gave them language and, most importantly, unity. Looking for the One who holds together the Church? Christ? Definitely. The Spirit? Even more so.

But, as far as our liturgical season is concerned, we're, in a way, completing that which was begun at Christmas. At Christmas, God became incarnate in Jesus Christ as an infant, and today God thunderously affirms Jesus' sonship as an adult. And now it is time for Jesus to begin his ministry -- the ministry in which he restores sinners to God by bringing God to sinners. That is, above all, the chief work of God and the Spirit descending upon us. God definitively says to us, "You are my son," or "You are my daughter," and to God we belong forever.

From that knowledge, then, follows the expectations related to the promises made at our Baptisms. When those who cannot speak for themselves are baptized, we ask the parents and godparents, "Will you be responsible for seeing that the child you present is brought up in the Christian faith and life?" Baptism and teaching (or catechesis) are directly connected; how can our baptismal faith have any meaning if we aren't taught to grow into it?

When the song "Teach Your Children" was written, this nation was struggling through turbulent times -- much like now but maybe not quite as bad. Graham Nash wrote the song and, in an interview, said that it was inspired, in part, by an image by the photographer Diane Arbus entitled "Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central

Park." Obviously struck by the jarring symbolism of childhood and violence, Nash wrote the song with an eye toward the implications of what our world teaches to our children.

Relating that to some experiences of my own, I've been to parts of the world where people hate each other. It's not pretty. Yes, children learn how to aim toy machine guns at people in, of all places, the Holy Land. I highly doubt that a child would figure that out on his own. Someone had to teach him. Being extremely impressionable, children will mimic the speech, actions, and attitudes of those they look up to...parents, teachers, coaches, clergy, businessmen and -women, elected officials -- you name it! Now, as a relatively small church, there's no way we can control all of those influences, but we can look at whose we are. We belong to Christ, and through Baptism into Christ, we are given his example to grow into as we learn of his love for us and then pass that on to the succeeding generations.

Will they turn out perfect? Well, did any of us? No. But as long as the good news of God's love prevails in them, we stand a chance. Like I said earlier, I know what places where people hate each other look like, and yes, they have tended to be "somewhere else." Today, may we, as we renew our baptismal vows, also reaffirm our commitment to ensure that "somewhere else" doesn't become our back yard. To that commitment we answer, as in our service moments from now, "I will, with God's help."

"I WILL, WITH GOD'S HELP!" Amen.