

# Homily for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

## January 13, 2019

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Today we celebrate the end of the Christmas season, and that may make you ask yourself why we would celebrate it, especially when Christmas “ended” a while ago. But today, God himself celebrates what is taking place in the Gospel: John the Baptist baptizes Jesus in the river Jordan. Today, God reveals the savior of the world to the people of times! St Luke tells us that Jesus’ baptism marks the beginning of his public ministry and that the people were “filled with expectation.”

Aren’t we filled with expectations today about the coming year. Isn’t this the time of year we think about the new us and what we want to accomplish this year? This is the time we set new and confirm old expectations of ourselves. As long as those expectations are in line with what God wants from our lives, we’ll see the grace in them. But if they are not in line with what God’s will is for us then he is going to have to do something “unexpected” to help us see it.

This is what is happening in our Gospel today. There were two reasons the people were filled with expectation! First, rumor had it that according to the prophecies of Daniel, the time was ripe for the arrival of the promised Messiah, the King anointed by God to restore the

independence and greatness of the long-suffering people of Israel. Scholars at the time didn't agree about the actual characteristics and identifying marks of that Messiah, but a sense that the time had come was widespread. Second, no true prophet had arisen in Israel in over two centuries. And so, when John the Baptist came onto the scene, they knew something big was afoot. Many hoped that he himself was the Messiah. The prophecy of Daniel and the preaching of John the Baptist, then, were clear, dramatic signs sent by God to indicate the coming of Jesus. Even so, Christ found a welcome in only a few hearts; the majority gave him up to be crucified. Why? Could it be that the people of Israel were expecting one kind of Lord, and God wanted to give them another?

We often fall into the same trap; we know clearly the things we want, but God sends us others, and we resent it. But if Jesus is truly the Lord, and if the greatest prophet of all time was not even worthy to "loosen the thongs of his sandals" (a job reserved to slaves at the time), why do we expect him to do things our way? Why do we expect him to adjust to our schedule? Isn't it possible that he knows better? God often acts in unexpected ways, so it's up to us to adjust our expectations, or else we may miss his grace altogether. In Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*, the newly-released convict Jean Valjean finds shelter from the cold in the house of a Catholic bishop. The bishop welcomes him and provides a warm meal. However, during the meal Valjean notices the

expensive silverware, and resolves to steal it. As soon as the bishop is asleep, he absconds with the silver.

The police collar Valjean, and, although he claims the bishop gave him the silverware, the police see through that fabrication and drag him back to the bishop. Valjean is trembling, since he knows that this means he'll be sent to the galleys for the rest of his life. However, something very unexpected happens. The police tell the bishop that Valjean claims he gave him the silverware. Valjean's fate hangs by a thread, as he breathlessly awaits the bishop's reply.

And imagine his disbelief when he hears the reply: "Yes, and I'm glad he's returned, since I also gave him the silver candlesticks, but he forgot to take them with him." Valjean's life can never be the same after that. The expectations of going to the gallows was met with the unexpected belief that the man really did have a good heart – the unexpected "someone believes in me". So Valjean dedicates the rest of his life to doing good to others.

It's true: God often acts in unexpected ways. And if we aren't humble and flexible, we may, like so many at the time of Christ, miss out on his grace, fail to recognize his action, or reject it even when we do recognize it. And that's exactly what the devil wants. He wants us to evaluate God's activity not in accordance with God's own standards – the

unexpected, surprising standards – but in accordance with the limited, prejudiced, self-centered standards of our fallen human nature.

How can we avoid playing into the devil’s hand this year? There are many things, but one of the most essential is to make sure that we take at least one of what I am going to call your “spiritual vitamins” every single day. Spiritual vitamins keep our faith healthy, so that our minds see reality the way it really is, not the way the devil wants us to think it is.

Spiritual vitamins take many forms. Reading and studying the Bible for fifteen or twenty minutes every day is an excellent spiritual vitamin – if we use truly Catholic resources to help us do so.

Learning how to do daily Christian meditation (not just transcendental or yoga meditations) is a great way to get your spiritual vitamin. Spending a few minutes at night to prayerfully reflect on whether we acted like faithful Christians during the day is a good one. Reading regularly from the lives of the saints and other good spiritual books is a strong spiritual vitamin. Starting and ending meals with a family prayer is another spiritual vitamin.

Dropping by a Catholic church on the way home from work or school to spend a few minutes praying in the presence of the Eucharist – another good one. If we want to stay tuned to God and be ready to

recognize and welcome his action in our lives this year, we have to administer a daily antidote to the poisonous world view that popular culture is constantly feeding into our imaginations. Start today - Seek the word of God in unexpected places, because those words are calling you out of whatever darkness you may be in. Knock on an unexpected door, because it may be the door God wants you to walk through to find the freedom, He is offering you. And in prayer, Ask God that you can hear his voice in unexpected ways because that is voice that called you to your own baptism and today celebrates your life!