

EPIPHANY: A TIME TO CELEBRATE GOD'S GIFT FOR ALL PEOPLE

First Sunday after the Epiphany
The Baptism of Our Lord
January 9, 2011

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

On Jordan's Bank

*On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh.
(Charles Coffin, 1676-1749)*

The opening line of this traditional Advent hymn strikes me as an appropriate segue to this week's text for the first Sunday after the Epiphany when the baptism of Jesus is commemorated. The season of Epiphany, which concludes the church year's Christmas cycle, focuses our attention on God's presence made known to all the world as manifested or revealed in Jesus Christ. A reference to the Jordan River serves as an apt metaphor to bridge the three seasons of the cycle (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany) and to transport us to Jordan's bank where John has been baptizing and preaching a message of repentance (Matthew 3:1-12).

The term Jordan (Hebrew *yardēn*) appears 181 times throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament); 117 of these references pertain to boundaries or to the Israelites' crossing and entering the Promised Land (Joshua 3, 4). These contexts have led to the Jordan River's designation as a powerful theological symbol or metaphor, particularly in connection with our physical death and crossing from earthly life to the world that awaits us as we make our new home with God. Consider these words from the following hymn by Samuel Stennett (1787):

*On Jordan's stormy banks I stand, and cast a wishful eye
to Canaan's fair and happy land, where my possessions lie.*

*When shall I reach that happy place, and be forever blest?
When shall I see my Father's face, and in His bosom rest?*

*I am bound for the promised land, I am bound for the promised land;
O who will come and go with me? I am bound for the promised land.*

The Jordan River runs south from Mount Hermon (located on the border of present-day Lebanon and southwestern Syria) to the Sea of Galilee and then continues to flow on to the Dead Sea. From north to south, the river acts as a boundary, separating the western and eastern parts of ancient Palestine. The name of the river (*yardēn*) is sometimes translated as "the descender," from the Semitic *yard*, "to descend," since the river "comes down" in its flow from north to south.

It is assumed that Jesus would have traveled southward from Nazareth in Galilee, perhaps along Jordan's banks, to reach the place where John was baptizing.

In this week's Gospel text we read that, at Jesus' baptism, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove and rested on him (3:16). Conceived by the Holy Spirit (1:18) and now baptized by the Holy Spirit, Jesus is declared by a voice from heaven as the beloved Son of God (3:17). Here, at the Jordan River, the manifestation of God is made known publicly, and Jesus' baptism inaugurates his commission to fulfill God's purposes. In the first of the so-called "Servant Songs" as recorded in Isaiah, the prophet tells us that God's servant will "bring forth justice" (42:1) and will be "a light to the nations" (42:6).

As we stand on "this side of the Jordan," in what ways will God's presence be manifested in our lives? How will we be "a light" to those whom we meet each day? As God's beloved children, may we resolve in this Epiphany season, and as we begin a new calendar year, to remain faithful in our calling to make Christ known.

This week's Reflection was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel, retired Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship, American Bible Society.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Togo – with thanks to God for their translation work, literacy projects, *FCBH* program, HIV and AIDS initiatives and ministry to prisoners and drug addicts; and with prayers that they may be able to begin work among Sunday School children, for their relations with the churches, for distribution, for fundraising, and for efforts to acquire a distribution vehicle; **Benin** – with thanks to God for his grace in granting peace to the country, for good relations with the churches, and for translation, literacy, distribution, fundraising and *FCBH* programs; and with prayers for the links with government offices and NGOs for holistic projects; also pray for peaceful presidential elections in March; **Niger** – with thanks to God for funding to launch the *FCBH* program, which has been warmly welcomed by the churches; and with prayers that more funds will become available for this project as well as for literacy work; also pray concerning the food crisis in the country as more than half the population has been affected; **Nigeria** – with thanks to God for the 50th anniversary of independence; and with prayers for their political leaders, for Bible distribution aimed at young people, and for the successful celebration of the *Year of the Bible*; also pray concerning the new building in Abuja, and for religious tolerance in the north.

Activity Corner: "Baptism: Joining God's Family"

Supplies needed: Bible

The word "baptism" comes from the Greek verb (*baptizo*) that means "to dip in water." The prophets of Israel instructed the people to bathe themselves as a way of showing that they wanted to be pure and to do what God wanted them to do (Isaiah 1:16,17). The Christian understanding of baptism involves leaving behind an old way of life and becoming part of God's family. In baptism, one dies to sin and receives new life in Christ (Romans 6:1-4). John baptized people in the Jordan River and called people to repent of their sins and turn their lives back to God in order to receive God's forgiveness. Water symbolizes God's washing away our

sins and reminds us of how God saved Noah and his family from the flood (Genesis 7:21-23) and also how God parted the waters of the Red Sea to save the Hebrew people (Exodus 14:21-31).

1. Use this time as an opportunity to read over the rite of baptism as it appears in your church's worship book or manual of church doctrine and discuss your church's baptismal traditions. Ask family members to talk about what their baptism means to them.
2. Read Matthew 3:13-17. Discuss what it means to be called by God. What did God call John the Baptist to do? What was Jesus called to do? What are we, as followers of Jesus, called to do?