

# ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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## BAPTIZED WITH FIRE

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Text of a Sermon preached the First Sunday after Epiphany

January 9, 2022

ISAIAH 43:1-7 | PSALM 29

ACTS 14:14-17 | LUKE 3:15-17,21-22

Shall we gather at the river? Shall we gather at the river that flows from the very throne of God. Shall we come with all the expectation of the people to the river Jordan, with the vision and knowledge of the prophet John. Today, on this celebration of the Baptism of our Lord, we may approach with the heart, and mind, and soul of Mary's son, son of God, Jesus of Nazareth.

From before he could remember he had heard and followed a voice. It pointed out to him the beauty and the terror of nature, and spoken to him on the wind. It had threaded chapters of sacred story together and highlighted the connected patterns of ritual and sacrifice. The voice opened the doors of temple and settled on those teachers who spoke plainly and honestly, and shook him in the presence of deceit and lies. It had focused his attention on what he came to call his father's business, the poor, the forsaken, the oppressed, and the powers that imprison us here.

He believe the psalmist and the prophet when they testified of the power of his Father to shape our destiny, when they confirmed: "I knew you in your mother's womb." One day he shared with his mother a memory of a being in the warm waters of her belly, and even there, hearing a voice calling him. She smiled, and reminded him that God hardly changed anything without the faith of a woman. Moses scooped up from the Nile. Hannah determined to seek relief from her barrenness. Not to mention the family stories of aunt Elizabeth and uncle Zechariah, and his cousin John.

His mother told him of the angel: how the word conceived the Word. And the message was received in faith. He had known it. He knew it. He did not stir. He rested there, planted, rooted, firmly within himself.

He walked outside. His friends and neighbors knew he was different, but could not say how. They, like us, were witnessing the secret at the beginning of all things. What would it mean to be born again, to be without sin? Even they could see his perfect harmony of thought and action, of desire and goal. He never raised his voice. He did not need to grasp and strive. His passions were strong, his will like fashioned and flexible metal. All he wanted was to serve another, to heed the voice.

At last, as he approached his third decade, the voice drew all his attention to his heritage. As if summarizing, it reminded him of every covenant and every promises, and impressed these upon him as his own. It became personal. He looked out upon the great distress and confusion of the people, the condition of the nation far from the reach of the sound of his Father's calling.

So he traced their steps and followed that story into the wilderness. Cousin John was there, baptizing, calling the people back to renew the old ways. Yet he knew, deep down, that the voice was opening up a new forward.

And so. The sinless one to the Jordan came. We see him approach, but what can we really see? He joins the pilgrims gathered. He waits his turn. At peace, ready, gathered in heart and mind, in concert, from the depths, the soul of the Word made flesh moves Jesus to cross the border between slavery and freedom, defeat and promise, the old and the new. He steps into the water.

There, in the middle of the Jordan, in the river, he comes to rest. His desire. The desire of the nations. Absolutely still. He looks down. He closes his eyes. He looks up. He goes down into the water. He climbs back out on the other side, to pray.

And there. A flash. The ground beneath him gives way as the sky above him opens. Light intensifies the rocks and surface of the water. Something like the gentle brush of a wing touches him and a delicate breath sinks into his body and soul without reaching bottom or barrier.

A breath on his neck. The weight of a hand on his head. Planted more firmly, Jesus feels as though he is being born up. Out of the open expanse came forth a voice (Num. 7:89), and he hears with great clarity: This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.

He thinks to look behind him to see who is being addressed. But he knows instantly that the form of the One Coming, who had inhabited his dreams, who had accompanied him in the days of his growing awareness, would not be there — only the purifying Spirit from within. The Son of Man and He had always been one.

And then words from the love song of Solomon: My dove in the clefts of the rock hidden in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, hear your voice! For your voice is sweet and lovely your face. (Song of Songs 2:14)

Suddenly stillness — and the ground under his feet.

A final prayer: Abba. Father.

A fire blazed in the actual water.

And the news began to spread. They told one another what they saw and heard. They described the form of the hovering spirit, the heavenly dove. They, like we, standing on this bank, they told each other that they too could see the future. They saw the heavens open. They felt the fire within.