



“What do you mean by this service?”

This was the question that little Israelite children were taught to ask at the Passover seder ritual (Exodus 12:26). This same question we too should ask in the month of January as we celebrate the Baptism of Christ. Through the liturgies of Epiphany and the blessings of homes, we also re-celebrate our own Baptisms, which are simply reenactments of His Baptism.

In the early Church the feast of Epiphany (also called Theophany) was THE big holy day apart from Pascha: Christmas as we know it was not celebrated at first. But the commemoration of Christ’s Baptism was observed, and with grand festivities. Nowadays we hang up our lights for December 25, but in the early centuries January 6 was the Feast of Lights, when candles and lamps were hung aloft in joyous remembrance. Christ’s Baptism was a theological goldmine, and one of the few events that all four Gospels recount (whereas the birth of Christ is found in only two, Matthew and Luke).

The Gospels paint a fairly simple picture of the scene: Jesus Christ enters the Jordan River with John the Baptist; He is immersed in its flow; as He comes out of the waters, the heavens open, a dove descends, and a voice of approval resounds from the skies. The significance of these details is not apparent at first reading. It might seem perhaps like just another extraordinary day in an extraordinary life.

But to comprehend the deeper meaning, you must cast your mind back to the book of Genesis. There we read of how God made all things, drawing forth the Creation from a dark and watery Chaos. We read then of how the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters. Here the verb in Hebrew connotes the behavior of a mother bird brooding over her nest, protecting and nurturing her offspring. The Spirit of God at the Creation was caring for the young world like a hen over her chicks.

Day by day the Lord shaped and developed His world, forming the light, the heavens, the oceans, and the dry land, as homes respectively for the stars, the birds, the fish, and the animals. And finally, as the crown of His creation, He formed man. “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,” speaks the Triune Godhead. And resting from His work, the Lord pronounces His approval on the brand-new heaven and earth: “And behold, it was very good.”

But this world fell into brokenness and disharmony through the sin of our first parents. The Lord could have destroyed humanity and all His creation with them—He could have let it all slip back into the dark watery chaos from which it came back in the time of Noah’s flood.

But this was not His will. His desire is to redeem His world, to transform this universe into a new heaven and a new earth. And this He would do by joining His imperishable nature to our broken and perishable nature, so that we might live with Him in harmony forever.

What we see on Epiphany, then, is *a re-staging of the Creation*: the Spirit hovering like a mother bird, in the form of a dove; the approval of the Father thundering from the open heavens; and out of the dark waters emerges the new creation—but this time God starts from the end and works backward! The first being to emerge from the waters is a man--the incarnate God, Jesus Christ. And so it begins—the healing of our nature, the re-harmonization of all creatures, the reconciliation of all living things to God. In time the New Creation will embrace the whole Universe (or the whole Multi-verse, if your physics so dictate). “For in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His Cross” (Colossians 1:19-20).

This is the meaning of the Baptism of Christ. And this is the meaning of our baptisms as well. For God chooses to populate His New World one person at a time, by drawing us out of the waters together with Christ, and citizens of the new creation with Him. But just as Baptism is first step and not the last in God's plan of re-creation, so to for our spiritual lives.

Think of your parents or grandparents on Ellis Island. They were people betwixt and between. They were in America—but not yet Americans. They had a choice—they could press on through hardship to win their citizenship in the New World, or they could turn around and get back on the ship that brought them.

Baptism is our Ellis Island. It brings us into the Kingdom of God, but much, much is required for us to become real citizens there. In the wake of the feast of Epiphany, when you receive the waters of *Agiasmo*, the waters of chaos turned into the waters of life, the waters of the new creation—when you bring it into your houses and businesses and offices, for drinking and for sprinkling, you declare your intention to become a part of the new creation yourself, and to bring your family and your home and your work into the Kingdom of God, which makes all things new. It is an ongoing commitment that is to be renewed yearly, and even daily.

When you receive the spray of divine presence that comes from the River Jordan upon you through the Holy Water, you declare your intention to live no longer as a citizen of this world, according to its customs and habits, according to the laws of survival and self-advancement and pride. You declare your desire to live as a citizen of the New World, according to the rule of love, of mercy and justice and humility before God and man.

This is the meaning of the service we do at Epiphany and in the house blessings of January. It is our Christian Fourth of July, our Declaration of Independence, our acceptance of Christ as our way of life and our commitment to following our leader and king into the new creation of God.

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