

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

These words were written by the Rev Dr. Howard Thurman,
Baptist minister who influenced Martin Luther King Jr. And they
seemed fitting as we today incarnate the baptism of Jesus by John.

Yes, Jesus, came to John to be baptized.

Now this might strike you as unusual if you think about it. As a rule, we do not link baptism to the faith of the people of Israel. Yet, baptism is, indeed, part of their tradition. However, it is seen here in a slightly different manner.

For our Jewish brothers and sisters, Baptism was a ritual of cleansing or purification so that one would be presentable to God. Known as *Mikveh*, it was a washing with water.

Reasons for mikveh could include the touching an unclean person, the dead or diseased, touching blood, or any number of other things that the Torah had determined as ‘unclean’. This need for purification before going to temple was a regular occurrence.

Usually the person being cleansed would bring an appropriate offering, such as doves, lambs, or sometimes simply just grains, to give to the priest and have the priest say the appropriate words to God before ‘washing’ the unclean person in the waters. The water would wash away the uncleanliness, thereby allowing the person to enter the Temple for

worship on the Sabbath. It was for the Jews not a one-time occurrence as it is for us but a ritual in which they engaged on a fairly regular basis.

And it was not that Jesus *needed* to be baptized, because his purity had already been declared. John hesitated. Yet Jesus insisted that it was proper to do this to fulfill all righteousness.

Pat Luna, Upper Room spiritual director spoke in *Disciplines 2011* about Jesus' baptism. "Jesus does not need to be baptized," she stated, "but the people need a living example. Jesus submits to baptism to demonstrate what is good and necessary. In this moment of consent, Jesus puts on the mantle of servanthood. Isaiah offers lovely metaphors for the tender mercy and healing touch that Jesus will offer the world."

Hence, Jesus, by his baptism, accentuated by the voice from heaven, lifted baptism from a cleansing to a sacrament meant for all peoples who come to him and who believe in him. It is a willful act of following Jesus. From this time on, baptism moved from a ritual cleansing to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This then became our

outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace as a major sacrament.

And Jesus ministry began ... ultimately leading him to the cross. It was there in the Jordan, where Jesus, as servant, became the example to be “purified” so to speak for the world to see, *and* by the Holy Spirit entered the royal priesthood. It was at this point, as a Jew, Jesus also reenacted the whole history of Israel, according to theologian Walter Bruggeman. It was at the Jordan that Moses interpreted the Torah and that Israel enters a land of freedom apart from the Pharaoh. It was at the Jordan that Elisha receives Elijah’s spirit. We are reminded of the Book of Genesis as God breaks through the clouds to speak directly to human beings.

Theologian Wendy M Wright tells us that “It is the vocation of all baptized Christians to become living icons, transparent windows through which the light of divine light pours. This is the ultimate search of human life, to become seers and bearers of that light. That being said, let us join in the tradition of Jesus this Sunday and dare renew our baptismal vows as we begin a new year.

Let us renew our vows with our hearts centered on not who we are, but who God is. It is our opportunity to keep the covenant with God as God has kept the covenant with us.

Let us, with willing hearts and a receptivity to God's Spirit, renew and remember that we, like Jesus on the banks of the Jordan that day, affirm each of our places in the priesthood of all believers.

Please turn now to page ... 302 of the Book of Common Prayer to renew your own vows.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, thank you for your work of renewal in us. Thank you for the fact that we are new in Christ, having put off our old selves and put on our new selves. Thank you for the fact that you are at work in us, making us new from the inside out.

When we fall back into the ways of our old selves, deliver us, Lord. Help us to choose to put off those ways. Ignite within us a desire for the new life, the life you offer in Christ. Continue, we pray, your work of renewing our inner being so that we might be more like you.

All praise be to you, O God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, because
you are making all things new, including us! Amen.