

The Baptism of Our Lord
January 8, 1989

Texts Isaiah 42:1-7
Psalm 45:7-9
Acts 10:34-38
St. Luke 3:15-17,21-22

Christ's baptism of fire
burns our old natures to a crisp,
and the children of the new creation
rise up out of the ashes!

In a sense the baptism of our Lord is another birth story. It is the birth of Christ not from the "blood, nor the will of the flesh nor man, but of God." (The Prologue of John) In the Gospel of Mark, the story of Jesus begins with his baptism and there are no birth narratives at all. In a sense then this is another version of the birth of Christ.

In Advent we get ready for his coming. Over Christmas we celebrate his Holy Birth. What a birth! If you understand the grandeur of the birth of the Son of God, full of grace and truth, then you understand how the birth of Christ means the birth of a new world, a cosmic birth. We spoke of the new creation in his birth for Christmas Day. We talked about Christ as the second Adam, the new Eve, and the second Paradise, the one of forgiveness and redemption. We spoke of the tree of life, and of the overcoming of original sin by Christ, and the primal goodness that Christ sets afoot in us.

Because of this, New Year is new because the birth of Christ makes all things new. It starts our creation all over again. God is with us, as God walked in the Garden of Eden with his first creation. And because this holy birth gives us a new birth, we become new persons who make the year new. 1989 is not new by the calendar. It is only new if we are born anew in the nativity, the birth of Christ, and if the heavenly sparkle brings a new time around us, and we start living in the new time that Jesus proclaimed, and the new day and world that Jesus ushered in. This will give you a happy New Year. The change in our calendar is meaningless without it. 1,989 years after the birth of Christ is a long time. Now is the acceptable time to allow the love of God to give you your personal Christmas - to give you a holy birth, and make you a new creature, equipped and fashioned to bring hope to the hopeless, trust to those in despair, a vision to the blind, and good works to glorify the Lord. That is New Year.

In the Gospel lesson we see John the Baptizer and Jesus the Christ. Cousins. In Isaiah - the figures of speech - "dimly burning wick" and "bruised reed" are in one sense an expression of the exact opposite. A "dimly burning wick" means a "brightly burning flame". A "bruised reed" means a "reed that does not shake in the wind". You may recognize that Christ referred to John the Baptist as such a reed. Nothing moved John. He

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confronted the whole chosen people and bid them repent. Like a wall, he stood before them, and all the people had to confess their sins and repent. John was an unshakeable reed. John was not a bruised reed, but a sturdy reed that smote the people with the rod of his mouth.

Christ is the light to the nations. The Israel of Christ, its new Jerusalem, the Holy City, the bright garden (Gethsemane) is the real light to the nations. Through God's people, who each have had a holy nativity in their baptisms, Christ ushers in a new time in this world - and we have to scoop as deeply as possible in his grace, to be able to present the plenteous redemption that Christ signifies and works for this world.

No dimly flickering wick but the brightly burning flame of Christ needs to blazon on our horizons. The Three Kings come to do him homage. They brought him gold, frankincense and myrrh.

But what the earth longs for, what the earth is shaking in contractions for is the way the kingdom of Christ comes. (The kingdom is within us and comes out of our hearts by the new perspective in which we gaze at this world seeing already almost God's heaven. In this new look anticipating God's gracious intervention, God comes and wills here on earth what is already in heaven.) It comes by an inner change that takes hold of people's hearts. They suddenly get born anew out of the love of God, and the rest of their lives becomes a journey into creation. The life that overcomes death, is born of Christ's holy birth, and the violence, destruction, disease, death, and the devil are all overcome - and the kingdom of heaven opens up to all believers.

You saw the way the kingdom of heaven opened up over Jesus. How the Father proclaimed: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And the way the angels poured out of heaven to proclaim their joyous "Noel" here on Earth.

Peace on Earth - may good will among men abound. May good will overcome and declare the kingdom of heaven nigh at hand. Trying to translate the message of the angels a little more closely, we might better read:

"Glory in the highest to God
and on Earth peace
in people of good will!"
(Luke 2.v.14)

This peace overflows out of these good willed people and spreads through the nations. The mighty deluge is watered by the the rushing springs of God's grace.

Jesus is not a Son of God like one of the deified Pharaohs, or Babylonian Emperors, or the false Roman Caesars who wanted to be named gods, and wanted to be worshiped. Jesus is the heavenly Messiah. He is truly the Righteous High Priest who made the sacrifice on Calvary pleasing to God once and for all. Jesus is the King of Kings at the same time and transcends what we usually understand as political orders of our day. But these political orders are fulfilled by Christ. Nations like to draw borders and fight over them. They like to mobilize their armies along them. They like to be able to put their hands in the

pockets of people who cross them, and collect "duties", customs, etc. Nations have armies and punish those who do not comply with the tribute they exact or the exploitation they extort. And delay and unwillingness to pay brings a quick display of who has power over whom. Nations use the threat of death and the fear of death to control people in the final analysis. This points roughly to political orders.

Why does Jesus have no army? Jesus was a King. Jesus is the true Son of God. The coastlands await his law. Today we might say the developing Third World countries of the South await his rescue, his justice. Here the hopelessness increases as the gap grows ever larger, and the situation seems far more disastrous than twenty years ago. But his throne endures forever. A scepter of righteousness is in his hand. He is a gentle ruler. The tender Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Christ is not afraid to be vulnerable, to show weakness, to really be accessible to those in hopeless situations.

But Jesus does not have an army. Jesus goes to the army and gets into their hearts. Gives them another spirit. makes them lay down their weapons, and beat them into plowshares. What defence, what weapon is deadly enough to prevent a word from going straight to our hearts, from preventing an act of love from melting us down into our human acceptance and mutual embarrassing weakness for one another.

Signification in a grand scale took place when the Marcos regime fell in Manilla in the Philippines. Marcos sent the tanks out to roll, and the nuns and children and others just held hands before them, and the tanks stopped. The soldiers climbed out of their tanks and joined the people, and a new day was won for the Philippines with Corazon Aquino. What a sign demonstrating how the armies against Christ are disarmed from within! As an aside, in her arraignment, Mrs. Marcos was finger-printed. She said: she had clean hands and we made them dirty. If she had confessed that she had dirty hands, then there could be some hope that her hands could be made clean. But now she said her hands are clean, so her sin continues to stick to them. Her soul remains dirty. (Compare John 9.v.41)

We have to have our holy nativity. We have to have our blessed baptism by Christ - a baptism of the Holy Spirit and a baptism of fire.

Yes, the brightly burning flame can set us on fire. What do we see in the light of the Holy Fire Christ lights in us?

1/ We have to change our ways.

2/ We have to be lifted out of our selfishness and see others and their needs. Not only the people here around us, but those also in the far countries that are now our very close neighbors because of how small the world has become.

In the words of a poet:

A tear that evaporated somewhere in Paraguay
will fall as a snowflake
onto the frozen cheeks of an Eskimo.

(Yevtushenko)

The 40,000 babies who die in the Camaroons each year, will affect you and me more than we could ever know. Hunger, famine, and poverty stalk the developing countries of the Earth and they await his law, and even more they await the gracious actualization of Christ's Gospel.

3/ Violence has to go. Lies have to cease. Let's plea that God's judgment burn us, so that what is false in us can be burned out, and only what's genuine in us remain. Let the fire of the baptism of Christ come upon us. And may our old natures get burned to a crisp and may the new Man, the new Woman, stand up out of the ashes, and may we take communion in a new wholeness, a new love, a new fellowship, a new society, a new union, that we might witness the new birth of a nation, the Israel of Christ, the new covenant to the peoples, the light to the nations. Let it start shining again in the sparkle and brightness of Christ - and snuff out the darkness of our countrymen (that we might gladly learn the tongues of other nations and take the trouble to learn how things are going with them) May Christ lift us up into the brightness of the Holy New World loved by God and being steered and directed away from destruction and toward salvation, into the new creation. Let us beg God for stout hearts that will not let the Savior go without also the this-worldliness of God's promised salvation. Amen.