

Baptism of our Lord

January 10, 2021

Jesus is the Best!

Mark 1:4-11

Are you the sort of person who saves the best for last? If you sit down at a banquet and find a piece of pie sitting above your place setting, do you dutifully wait until after the main meal has been cleared away? Or do you sneak a bite or two first? If you're reading the newspaper, do you start with the part you like best — the comics, the sports page? Or do you read the minor news first, even the obituaries, rewarding yourself only at the end?

At Christmas time, especially in houses with small children, “save the best for last” is usually the rule. In many households, parents and children sit down together, around the Christmas tree. Childhood enthusiasm being what it is, parents must enforce a certain amount of order on this occasion or else the gift-giving will swiftly degenerate into chaos. Every once in a while, a child will pick a certain gift up, and father or mother will say, “Don't open that one yet. Save it for later.” That's how the kids know that gift is one of the best.

How many parents have pulled a certain innocent prank when it comes to an intensely desired but very expensive gift? A child is looking for, say, a bicycle. When every package has been opened and the realization begins to dawn that perhaps this is not the year, mother or father says, “Why don't you take a look out on the porch?” And there, covered by an old blanket, is the

shiny, new bike. The best is saved for last!

Most of us prefer it that way. At the circus, we really don't expect the show to begin with the high-wire act or the lion tamer. No, we expect the clowns to come out first, then maybe the trick riders, or the trampoline artists. Only when the circus is nearly over, when anticipation has built to the bursting point, are we ready for the big show.

There's comfort in the fact that the best is saved for last. If the universe is an ordered place, then this is one of its organizing principles. And so, we wait for dessert. We open Christmas presents carefully and deliberately. We sit patiently through the warm-up acts.

Yet, in a larger sense — in our lives — is this true? Is the best truly saved for last? That's the question for us. And it's not so easily answered as you may think. If any of us were asked, "Is God in control? Does God save the best for last?" most of us would be inclined to answer yes. Yet, the answer that really counts is not the well-rehearsed Sunday-school answer, but the answer we live out, day to day. Do we really live as though God is saving the best for last?

John the Baptist does. Our gospel lesson tells how John prepares the way for Jesus. John is the man of the hour, or maybe even the decade. The Jewish people are suffering under Roman oppression. Freedom is limited, taxes are crushing, and their puppet king, Herod, lives in luxury while children go

hungry. The people cry out for justice, yet their religious leaders, the scribes and the Pharisees, can't forsake their petty debates long enough even to listen.

And then comes John, a ragged, wild-eyed holy man from out of the wilderness, preaching a gospel of repentance. John's preaching is unlike any the people have ever heard. He speaks right to them, to their problems and struggles. He preaches to all people, even the rich and powerful, and his message is always the same: "Repent and follow God. Be baptized, begin a new life."

John's message is unorthodox, to be sure. He seems to care nothing for the elaborate system of laws the Pharisees spend their lives promoting. The law says baptism is only for Gentiles converting to Judaism, to purify them; native-born Jewish boys have only to be circumcised. Yet, John thunders that all people must confess their sin and be baptized — men, women, rich, poor, the strong in faith, the faltering — all must pass through the waters.

John's word is harsh in one sense: It accepts no excuses, allows no exceptions. Yet, for an oppressed people hungry for justice, John's preaching is good news. The people flock to him. For once, the spiritual focus is away from the temple rituals and on the countryside, on the River Jordan, where John stands waist-deep in the swift-flowing water, calling all comers to repent.

But then, John says something that completely surprises his followers: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.”

John is telling the people the best is saved for last. Some of them don't like it. They can't believe John is stepping aside to let someone else take his place. But others marvel at this new thing God is doing. They wait expectantly.

A young man shows up to be baptized, like all the rest. The gospel accounts differ on just what happens next. Mark says he is baptized by John, and immediately the young man has a vision: “He saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

The Greek verb Mark uses to describe the heavens being “torn apart” is the very same one he uses at the end of his gospel, at the crucifixion. Remember how when Jesus dies, the temple veil is likewise torn apart, from top to bottom? It's the same word: a little foreshadowing of what's ahead for this earnest young man, coming to John to be baptized in the Jordan.

Matthew's account is a little different. Matthew tells how John tries to get out of the baptism, protesting it is Jesus who ought to be baptizing him. In John's gospel, it is John the Baptist, not Jesus, who sees the descending dove.

And in Luke, the vision of the dove descending and God's voice out of heaven is not a private revelation as in the others, but public, for all to see. Whatever really happened that day, the result is clear. God is in control, and has a plan for redeeming the world. John is not the agent of redemption, as the people thought, but merely its announcer. It is in Jesus that true salvation, true grace, are to be found. The best is saved for last.

That belief — that the best is saved for last — is central to our Christian faith. It means we must school ourselves on how to defer pleasure. That's a hard lesson for most of us to learn, especially in this society that worships immediate gratification. Yet, it's a deeply held belief of Christianity that pleasure is not the ultimate goal. Joy is.

There is a difference between pleasure and joy. C.S. Lewis puts it very clearly in one of his books when he writes, "Joy is never within our power, but pleasure often is." We're like children faced with a pile of presents under a Christmas tree. Do we tear into them all at once, in a mad frenzy that will be over as quickly as it began, with only a pile of torn wrapping paper and dismembered bows to show for it? Or do we hang back, watching for the right cues, waiting for unexpected joys to be revealed to us?

The very definition of joy, according to Lewis, is that it's unexpected. Lewis entitles his autobiography *Surprised By Joy*. That's because his personal

journey to Christianity was a journey away from aimless pleasure-seeking and toward joy. For him, it is very much a matter of letting go — letting go of our fear that pleasure is all there is, learning to trust God to give us those gifts of joy that come to us so unexpectedly, beyond our deserving.

Joy surprises. That's its very nature. You can't capture joy any more than you can capture the wind — yet, there are plenty of people trying to bottle it and sell it to us. Joy comes to us as an unexpected gift. All we can do is be attentive to the wonderful, winsome ways God has of giving it to us — and to trust that in our case, God continues to save the best for last. John the Baptist looked up from the River Jordan and saw a young man coming toward him, and at that moment he knew. He looked into those eyes, that seemed somehow to hold all human pain and tears and even joy, and he knew. John knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God is in control, and that God continues to save the best for last. And the Best is JESUS! I invite you today to look to Jesus, the very BEST and you will know this good news, too!