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Epiphany of the Lord
Liturgical Year B

In the Catholic liturgical calendar, Jesus grows up very fast! After his birth December 25 and his naming and circumcision a week later, the wise men came last Sunday. So here we are just a week later and on to the Gospel scene strides a full-grown Jesus. This is then Jesus' first adult appearance in public. He presents himself to John for baptism of repentance in the Jordan.

John the Baptist is here today not to prepare for the Lord by preaching but to administer a ritual washing in the river. He "baptizes" those who receive his message. For them, it's a sign of repentance from sin.

Jesus comes to the river and joins the crowd. Into the river he goes with the throng of sinners. Now, wait just a minute. Isn't this Jesus? Isn't this the Son of God who, to quote one of our Mass prayers, is "like us in every way, sin alone excepted"? Isn't this Jesus who came to put our sins to death with him on the cross? What's he doing here marking the beginning of his public life with baptism, a sign of repentance? What's going on?

There's a lot moving in this very brief narrative. Let me just lift up two aspects for our reflection today. First, the story of Jesus' baptism is the message of a God who dwells among sinners. Then too the story is also a profound statement about the infinite worth and dignity of every human life. Take a closer look with me.

First, God among sinners. Here is Jesus joining sinners in a baptism of repentance. St. Paul in one of his letters puts it in a nutshell: "God was at work in Christ," he reminds us, "reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). To put it another way: in everything Jesus says and does God is at work, showing us how closely and intimately God relates to sinful men and women, people who need divine mercy and forgiveness. Jesus stands in the Jordan river, just as he lay in a manger, just as he will hang on a criminal cross – precisely because God is in this Jesus identifying himself with every aspect of all our births, lives, deaths and struggles with sin. This is Emmanuel, God with us, when we most need God to be with us – in our sin and need for forgiveness and healing.

So Jesus doesn't hesitate to join the sinners at the Jordan who are repenting, looking for mercy, healing and forgiveness. No, Jesus himself doesn't need to repent. But by taking baptism from John, the Gospel story today shows Jesus doing what God in Christ always does – stands by us, stands with us in our great, daily, lifelong struggle between sin and repentance.

Second, the Gospel story of Jesus' baptism holds a grace for us. Standing in the water, Mark tells us, Jesus receives the Holy Spirit. It descends, the Gospel says, literally into Jesus. But if that happens to Jesus, it happens as a sign for all of us. Sinners though we are, when we seek forgiveness, the Holy Spirit – the very creative breath of God – comes into us.

We are, then, all of us, Spirit-filled. Yes, in one real sense, this is a sign of baptism. But, no less to the point, the Spirit descending on Jesus is also a statement about who you and I are before God. We're not rocks, or plants, or even animals alone. We – amid all God's myriad creation – are unique. We are creatures endowed with a spirit, a soul, a part of us that comes directly from the hand of God. It's easy to lose sight of this profound truth about ourselves. But the Gospel today calls us back to it. Of all creation, humans alone are endowed with an immortal spirit, "created in the image and likeness of God".

That truth grounds our struggle for human rights. Wherever men and women are reduced to robots, made the chattel who have no voice, no respect, no basic rights, we speak for them. We demand of the world that every human being, endowed with an immortal spirit, receives the respect, dignity and freedom that is their birthright as a child of God. Then too, we insist that human life is not a laboratory creation. Human life is a gift born of the fusion of divine and human love. As gift, it is not a commodity, not an experiment, not a disposable reject. When human life begins, it is Spirit-filled and spirit-gifted. That spirit of life given by God can be taken by God alone. Why does the church speak for the unborn? Why do Christians and Catholics recoil before the wanton destruction of unborn life? Precisely because life is spirit-filled, unique, the breath of God. Why do Catholics and Christians and so many others pause in dismay before human cloning, genetic engineering, assisted suicide, and euthanasia? Here is the picture of Jesus, one with us, gifted with the Spirit. He speaks to all of us of our own spiritual character, our unique place in the wonder of God's creation.

God is with us today, standing with us in the struggle of every sinful man and woman to find our way to God. Jesus in the Jordan, with the heavens torn open and the Spirit coming into him, is also a sign of who we are and who we are called to be, of the singular gift and dignity of every human life.

We are not hopeless. We are not insignificant. We are not forgotten. In the Jordan today and in this Eucharist, Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. It's a voice of hope to close the Christmas season and get on with the rest of the year.