

Sunday's Word

Except for John, who omits it, each of the Gospel writers puts his own stamp on the story of the baptism of Jesus. Luke's approach is distinctive, and relates to the fact that his work is a double volume: Luke and Acts of the Apostles.

In Luke's day the Jesus movement has shifted over to the Gentiles, leaving the Jewish community largely behind. Luke demonstrates that this is God's plan. Neither an accident nor a mistake. To show this he makes active use of the Holy Spirit in his version of the story.

We are familiar with the role of the Spirit in the beginning of Acts, with Peter's explanation just after, using the scripture from Joel (Acts 2:15-21). What is less obvious is that Luke begins his Gospel similarly. His account of the baptism highlights the role of the Spirit, and subsequently, in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus explains this, using the book of Isaiah (Lk 4:17-19).

In what way can it be said that Luke highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in his account of the Baptism (3:21-22)? If you look at his description carefully, noting its differences from Matthew and Mark, you can see some of this.

First of all, a striking feature of Luke's approach is to position the story of John's arrest before the baptism (3:19-20). Mark, for instance, gives us the baptism first (Mk 1:9-11), and then the arrest of John (1:14). Luke apparently wants to get John



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out of the way (as the last figure of the former covenant) before Jesus takes the stage. But it leaves him with a problem. Who will baptize Jesus?

He solves that problem in two ways. First, he relates the baptism as having taken place in the past, before the arrest of John. Secondly, he doesn't mention John at the baptism, since this would surely raise questions about sequence — something that hasn't bothered most people, until someone like me points it out. Luke would just as soon not draw attention to it himself.

Omitting mention of John, it leaves the Spirit as the main actor on stage in the baptism account. Subtle, but definite. If we knew only Luke's version, and didn't have the other gospel versions in our heads, it would be immediately apparent.

Today's other readings support this emphasis. Currently we have two sets of options for the other readings — first, second, and response psalm. In the New Testament readings, both Acts 10: 34-38 and Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7, emphasize the role of the Spirit. The Acts reading is the

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FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Is 42:1-4, 6-7

First Servant Song

Ps 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10

A storm crosses over

Acts 10:34-38

Peter's Kerygma speech

Lk 3:15-16, 21-22

The Holy Spirit descended upon him

<http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/011313.cfm>

fifth account of Peter's sermons in this book. These sermons summarize the gospel story. In this case, Peter emphasizes the baptism and the power of the Spirit. The selection from Titus also reads like a summary, in this case of the mystery of salvation entering history. Again the Spirit is mentioned in relation to baptism.

Both Old Testament options are from the prophet we call Second-Isaiah. And in the gospels both passages are linked to John the Baptist. Isaiah 42:1-4, the first of the Songs of the Suffering Servant, is quoted by the Voice at the baptism, indicating that Jesus will adopt the role of the Servant.

The second option, Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11, begins the section attributed to Second-Isaiah. It calls for a return from their exile



in Babylon, and it depicts it in terms of a road across the desert. In the gospels, the voice crying in the desert is John's. Luke extends the quote to include the part about "all flesh shall see the salvation of God," hinting at the mission of Acts.

Finally, both psalm options stress the divine in nature. Perhaps an allusion to the heavens opening at the baptism.

For reflection: Where is the Holy Spirit in our own baptism?

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