

Bible Challenge January 4 – 10, 2016

INTRODUCTION

The Baptism of Our Lord (celebrated January 10) cannot help but recall our own and all baptismal blessings. We recall and celebrate our adoption as daughters and sons, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the promised company of almighty God when we "pass through the waters . . . the rivers . . . fire." On this day the heavens open again, for this assembly, and we receive the gift of the beloved Son of God in bread and wine.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 43:1-7

Near the end of Israel's exile in Babylon, God promises to bring them home. They need no longer be afraid, because the one who formed, created, and called them by name now redeems them from all their enemies. God declares them precious and honored, and God loves them.

Adventure Challenge: Isaiah 43:1 – 21 (or 43:1-28).

Explorer Challenge: Option A. Research Israel's exile in Babylon to learn more about the probable audience and situation for Isaiah 43.

Option B. Isaiah 43 personifies God, describing God with human characteristics. What kind of a "person" is implied? (Hint: in this passage God is not pictured as a shepherd or as a farmer, nor as one controlling the weather, as in Psalm 29 our next reading.)

PSALM: Psalm 29

The voice of the LORD is upon the waters. (Ps. 29:3)

Adventure Challenge: Read at least two different translations of this Psalm.

Explorer Challenge: Research any words or phrases that you may not completely understand.

Example: What does "ascribe" mean, exactly? Who or what are the "heavenly beings" in verse 1? What might be behind the phrase "causes the oaks to swirl" in verse 9?

SECOND READING: Acts 8:14-17

Peter and John are sent to support the new Christians in Samaria, a group that was recently baptized after hearing the good news of Christ through the preaching of Philip. Here the Samaritans receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in the laying on of hands.

Adventure Challenge: Acts 8.

Explorer Challenge: This incident takes place in Samaria (also the home of the Good Samaritan and the Samaritan woman of the Gospel stories). Research why people identified as "the apostles at Jerusalem" would be skeptical that people of Samaria "had accepted the word of God," so skeptical that they sent Peter and John to investigate. What are the historical, cultural, and religious sources for their attitude?

GOSPEL: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.

The reading opens with questions about the identity of the Messiah. John the Baptist insists that he is not the Messiah; instead he points ahead to one who is coming. And whether the voice of God was heard by all or only by Jesus, God settles the matter: Jesus is God's beloved Son.

Adventure Challenge: Luke 3.

Explorer Challenge: Option A. In Jesus' time, what were Jewish customs and attitudes regarding baptism? Why did people do it and what did it signify?

Option B. Compare the baptism stories in Matthew 3:13 – 17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22, and John 1:29-34.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Almighty God, you anointed Jesus at his baptism with the Holy Spirit and revealed him as your beloved Son. Keep all who are born of water and the Spirit faithful in your service, that we may rejoice to be called children of God, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION: A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (*Matt. 3:17*)