

## THE FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD (YEAR B)

January 10, 2021

Isaiah 42:1–4, 6–7 • Acts 10:34–38 • Mark 1:7–11

### I.

On Wednesday afternoon,  
I was dealing with two things simultaneously  
when I learned that a mob had stormed the US Capitol in Washington, DC.

One was matter was pedestrian;  
the other was existential.

First, I was at the dry cleaners to resolve a dispute  
about a clerical shirt that had been destroyed in the cleaning process.

That issue was resolved calmly, logically, and fairly,  
and in the middle of that discussion,  
I started receiving text messages from a hospital chaplain:

A family was requesting a priest to visit their father,  
who had been placed in hospice care.

For me, these experiences offer insight about what our faith has to do  
with the terrible and appalling events of January 6:  
resolving differences,  
how we treat other people,  
and what our lives are ultimately about.

### II.

Violence, in any form and for whatever reason,  
must be quickly and clearly be condemned.

Five people were killed because of the insurrection at the US Capitol.

American democracy was also a victim of that violence,  
as lawmakers, who were carrying out their constitutional responsibilities,  
had to seek shelter.

Those who stormed the Capitol are responsible for their actions,  
and should be held accountable.

It's also true that that violence was not spontaneous;  
there are social ills that support and allow it to grow.

These problems have been many years in the making,  
and it will take years to solve them.

Being age 45,  
I'm old enough to remember a time when American politics was different.

There were disagreements and exaggerations, of course,  
but the environment wasn't as poisonous as it is today.

Between 1999 and 2000—  
before I went to the seminary—  
I worked on Capitol Hill  
for a member of the House of Representatives.

Even then, were different than they were today.

This year is a reminder of what has changed in American politics and society.

Last summer, there was violence—  
including here, in Richmond—  
after the tragic shooting of George Floyd.

These waves of violence—  
last summer and last week—  
represent extremes in American society;  
most Americans denounce those actions.

But the polarization of society in recent decades, in my opinion,  
has contributed to these outbreaks of violence.

That concerns all of us.

Increasingly, Americans have stopped listening to each other, retreating instead to the echo chambers of their preferred cable news channels and social media platforms.

Physically or virtually, Americans are shouting past each other.

Likewise, people seem to be closed to experiences different from their own, and tend to quickly apply stereotypes to others.

We are unlikely to give people the benefit of the doubt, but quick to take their words out of context or twist their meaning.

It means that there's little room for honest and patient dialogue, and few incentives to change one's opinion.

Likewise, there doesn't seem to be much interest in learning, in figuring out solutions, in marshalling evidence in a rational way, and in learning to peaceably disagree, without demonizing an opponent.

Another factor, surely, is that truth has become relative; it is no longer absolute.

We no longer agree on what is right and wrong.

We think that truth just a matter of personal opinion, conviction, or choice, which can be easily dismissed by a contrary opinion, conviction, or choice.

The lessening of God's role in society is yet another factor.

God is the one who establishes truth, and he is the source of rights that the government and all others must respect.

Without God, there is no absolute guarantee of human rights.

When there is violence in the political realm—on any side—it's because political opinions have instead become absolute.

That is ideology: a system of beliefs,  
which can take over someone's life with disastrous effects

### III.

Today's Gospel presents a different kind of life.

Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River.

The commemoration of this event is part of the Christmas season—its final day—  
because it is an epiphany or manifestation.

At his baptism, Jesus' identity is revealed once more:  
“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

The Baptism of the Lord is also our epiphany—  
a declaration of our dignity, worth, and calling.

Each person is created by God in the divine image,  
and, therefore, has dignity that must be respected.

Human dignity spans from conception until natural death,  
and it is not lost by personal faults, annoying idiosyncrasies,  
or contrary political opinions, however odious.

John the Baptist proclaims:

“I have baptized you with water;  
he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Following his resurrection,  
and as the culmination of his saving work,  
Christ poured out the Holy Spirit upon the Church.

The sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation make us followers of Christ,  
who have the authority and responsibility to act in his name,  
and who are channels of his presence in the world.

Our Catholic faith is not one aspect of our lives,  
like our hair color or eye color.

A Catholic is who I am;  
it is the purpose and meaning of my life.

And at the end of my life,  
I will render an account to God, and to no one else.

I can tell you:  
when someone is on the verge of death,  
like the gentleman I anointed on Wednesday,  
that truth becomes eminently clear.

Ideologies do not bring eternal life.

So, what we think, what we say, and how we act each day matters.

We have a duty to engage in civic life because we are stewards of creation,  
guided by the two great commandments:  
love of God and love of neighbor.

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord is a declaration of our identity  
and a preview of our destiny.

A destiny that can shape our lives and the world in which we live:

“You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter;  
with you I am well pleased.”