



CONNECTING WITH  
THE SACRAMENTS

# BAPTISM

*Alive in Christ*

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# *Introduction*

**Alive in the Word** brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each of the chapters.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume on the topic of baptism is one of several volumes that explore **Connecting with the Sacraments**. Scripture offers a wealth of ways to reflect on the grace we access in our sacramental lives. By spending time with passages that focus on the spiritual dynamics of each sacrament, our own experiences of the sacraments will deepen. Our ability to appreciate how God works in our lives and in the lives of others will expand.

## *Alive in God's Love*



*Begin by quietly asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read the account of the baptism of Jesus from the first chapter of Mark.*

### **Mark 1:4-11**

<sup>4</sup>John [the] Baptist appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>People of the whole Judean countryside and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. <sup>6</sup>John was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He fed on locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>And this is what he proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the holy Spirit."

<sup>9</sup>It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. <sup>10</sup>On com-

ing up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from the heavens, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

*Following a few moments of quiet reflection on the passage from the Gospel of Mark, consider the background information provided in Setting the Scene.*

### *Setting the Scene*

At the heart of our baptismal identity is the knowledge that each one of us is loved by God. We are elements of God’s creation and, like the cosmos that flowed from primordial waters, God looks upon his good creation in us and is well pleased (v. 11; see Gen 1:31). As baptized disciples of Christ, the goodness of our baptismal identity is manifest in Christ’s own baptism in the Jordan, in which we know God’s intimacy with us and through which we also have emerged into the promised land of Christ’s life.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ baptism is not simply an account of a past event, a prologue before Mark’s rushing and roaring story of Jesus’ mighty deeds and authoritative teaching. Rather, in this story we hear an ongoing proclamation of Jesus’ core identity: this is Christ, Son of God, anointed with God’s love (v. 1; Mark 15:39). As followers of the risen Christ, we too are invited to enter into and tell the story of God’s love among us (Mark 16:15).

What is your understanding of baptism? How would you explain it to someone?

*Mark 1:4-11 will be explored a few verses at a time to deepen your understanding. The questions in the margins may be used for personal reflection or group discussion.*

### *Understanding the Scene Itself*

<sup>4</sup>John [the] Baptist appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>People of the whole Judean countryside and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. <sup>6</sup>John was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He fed on locusts and wild honey.

Why would one enter the desert wilderness, a place of vulnerability, a place apart? The figure of John the Baptist suggests a motivation. He appears in the desert like the Old Testament prophet Elijah—wearing a hairy garment, with a leather belt (v. 6; 2 Kgs 1:8)—proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

In both his unkempt appearance and stark diet, John is a visible exaggeration of what we often recognize but can't quite articulate: something is not right with our normal patterns of living in the world, and we may need



to drastically refocus, even away from ordinary concerns like dining and appearance.

According to the gospel text, “the whole Judean countryside” and “all the inhabitants of Jerusalem”—both rural folk and city-dwellers—streamed into the desert to see John and be baptized by him. Perhaps they discovered what we have found in our day: society tends to squelch the fullness of our identity by separating us from one another. To step into the wilderness is to enter a place of encounter with God, often by embracing what Pope Francis calls the “‘mystique’ of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage” (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 87).

The baptism that John proclaimed is thus already beginning to be realized in the “mingling flood tide” of humanity that has appeared with him in the desert. Here we can see the promise of the gospel that Jesus will later embody: our deepest identity is to live in the reality of God’s love where love of God is saturated with love of neighbor (Mark 12:30-31). To live in this wilderness of encounter is also to remain vulnerable to the heat, hunger, thirst, and fear that can overtake us and turn us against one another. In the first century, traveling together by caravan was essential for physical survival. So too for societal survival and relational flourishing in today’s wider wilderness of encounter: it can be messy and chaotic, involving misunderstandings,

Can you think of a time when you recognized aspects of your identity flowing from your relationships with others or in service to your neighbor?

mistrust, discomfort, and setbacks. But when we persist in our desire to cling to one another in our diversity, we sometimes recognize glimpses of a new world being created.



<sup>7</sup>And this is what he proclaimed: “One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the holy Spirit.”

Just as John the Baptist was the gateway to Jesus’ baptism and ministry, who are the people (family, mentors, saints) who led and loved you into baptism and discipleship?

In John the Baptist’s humble statement pointing away from himself and toward Christ, we find an implication that Jesus will have a baptizing ministry (v. 8). There is some question about whether Jesus himself baptized (see John 3:22 and 4:2, which seem to offer some contradiction). Whether or not Jesus baptized with water, John proclaims that Jesus will baptize with the Spirit (Matthew adds “and fire”; 3:11). Here John points to the distinction between his baptizing ministry and that of Jesus: God’s activity and power are present and churning in a new way. The “holy wind” of the Spirit that breathed creation into birth (Gen 1:2; 2:7) is now present in the life of Christ. He will renew creation with his life breath and, as we will explore later in this volume, will immerse his followers in a new sacrificial way of life (Mark 10:38-40).