

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Little Xenia Roxanne Joli “Rocky” Dorn looked very calm and content when I visited her and her grandmother on Monday, November 30th, at St. Vincent Carmel Hospital. “Rocky” was a newborn, and her mother, Suzie Hunden Dorn, was still in recovery following childbirth, so Grandma Judy Hunden was privileged to be the newborn’s companion.

Just a few hours old, little “Rocky” was resting quite calmly and comfortably, wrapped tightly in a blanket. She didn’t seem to mind when I touched her and gave her a “look-see,” or even when I fully placed my hand upon her and offered a prayer of thanksgiving for her birth, and a prayer for her mother’s recovery.

“Rocky” was then very much a quiet and peaceful child, but maybe it’s premature to attempt to judge a child’s temperament so early in life – but surely any parent can understand the hope for a pleasant and cooperative baby.

Are some children born to be quiet and others, to borrow a song title, “Born to Be Wild”? Are there “born winners” and “born losers” among us? I think not, regarding these latter choices (you may have a different opinion), but in this spirit of birth “images,” consider now this one: “Born in the shadow of the cross.”

This describes very well the birth of Jesus. He was born with a cross in his future. Of course, Christmas is over. So why am I still talking about the birth of Jesus? Well, it’s appropriate to use the language of birth today because our Gospel text uses this same language of birth in speaking of Jesus’ baptism.

As Jesus emerges from the waters, while he is praying, the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends upon him in the bodily form of a dove.

While all this is happening, Jesus hears these words: “You are my son.” These are words that would have been quite familiar to the people of Israel. These words are found in Psalm 2 in the Old Testament, and were used in connection with the coronation of the king of Israel (Psalm 2:7, NRSV).

The priest or some other worship leader would anoint the newly selected king with oil, a symbol of the spirit of God, and say or sing these words on behalf of God. “You are my son, today I have begotten you.”

The words signified not his birth as a human person, but his emergence, his birth, as the king. God births the king into existence by means of his own gracious action. And the language at Jesus’ baptism is intended to draw our attention to this very thought.

God is announcing, to Jesus and to all the rest of us, the true nature of Jesus’ identity.

He is the anointed king. True, it's water streaming down Jesus' face instead of the traditional oil, but it's still symbolic of the presence of the Holy Spirit. This presence is further symbolized in Jesus' case by the appearance of a dove.

The purpose of this telling of the baptism of Jesus is to announce the nature of his kingship. Jesus is the anointed king, the Messiah, the Savior, God's own chosen servant, and more.

But the coronation song of Psalm 2 is not the only tune playing in Jesus' head as he arises from the baptismal waters. There's another familiar song that's tied closely to the coronation psalm in Jesus' baptismal experience.

This other song comes from a collection of poems found in the book of the prophet Isaiah. These are typically known as the "servant poems" or the songs of the suffering servant. The portion that is heard at Jesus' baptism, "with you I am well pleased," comes from the very first verse in this series of poems.

Some scholars believe that by invoking this beginning verse, all the rest then are implied. And it's from these servant poems that we assert that Jesus "will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth" (Is. 42:4).

The servant poems also inform us that Jesus as the servant "shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up" (Is. 52:13).

But there are other refrains as well. In the servant poems we are told, "he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed" (Is. 53:5).

We all know it's hard to listen to two different songs at the same time. Invariably one gets drowned out by the other, or else both get lost in the confusion of the merger. But Jesus seems to have held both of his baptism songs together.

He was anointed the chosen king, the Messiah. But as king he would suffer for his people. Jesus walked out of the baptism waters into the shadow of the cross. The music of his coronation was mixed with the strains of the suffering servant.

Of course it is impossible for us to read Jesus' mind. We don't know that he walked around every day after his baptism reflecting on his experience, evaluating its significance for his mission and purpose. But it sure seems like he did.

Judging from the way Jesus conducted himself, the people he associated with, the values he adopted and espoused, it certainly seems as if the idea of the suffering servant king continued to direct Jesus' life all the way to the cross.

But here's the question worth asking ourselves today: What's the baptism song playing in our head? The church's reflection on the meaning of Jesus' baptism has helped us understand the function and meaning of our own baptism.

Baptism is certainly not a magical act in which God imputes salvation and blessing to us by means of the water. And baptism is not simply an entrance requirement, though it has been used that way by certain Christian groups. But if it is not these things, what is it?

Our baptism, just as it was for Jesus, is about our identity. First and foremost, it is about with "whom" we identify. Following Jesus into baptism is mostly about following Jesus. Baptism is just the first step. Following Jesus means learning about him and learning from him.

Obviously we're not anointed kings, but we are servants. Whatever other identifying titles we may carry: Mom, Dad, professional, artist, laborer and so on, we as Christians can certainly attach servant to those titles. And the suffering part of our servant life usually takes care of itself.

But even before we experience our own suffering, we're clearly called to stand with and serve those who suffer. Our baptism links us to the one whose chief identity was that of a suffering servant. This becomes the starting point for giving meaning and significance to our own baptism.

In addition to helping us embrace "who we are," our baptism also gives definition to whom we are with – to which community we belong. This is not a call for some narrow sectarianism, but the fact remains that one of the purposes of baptism is to call us out of the world and into a community that functions "in but not of the world."

Even the very word "church," in the original language of the New Testament, means "called out." Baptism is what a scholar might call a "liminal moment." The word "liminal" comes from a word which means "threshold," and this tells us that the act of baptism takes us to the boundary between one world and another.

We stand on one side of baptism clearly part of a certain worldview. In the water, we renounce that view and "put on Christ" as a new view of what's real. This is clearly reflected in the Apostle Paul's speaking of "dying with Christ, and being raised to new life."

Baptism also helps us understand what we are to be about. Jesus knew that as the suffering servant king, he would eventually face the cross.

Out of that act of sacrificial love comes the redemption that makes hope possible for all of us.

Where will our servant identity take us? What opportunities for caring, sharing, and helping are implicit in our baptismal experience? What societal injustices will we oppose as the result of our baptismal identity? What baptismal music is playing in your head, and to what form of service are you being called? Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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