



A Homily on Holy Baptism

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I'd like to bring your attention back to the prayer we prayed at the beginning of the baptismal liturgy. (It's on page 22 in the blue booklets.) We prayed:

Almighty God, who delivered your chosen people from slavery in Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea and established with them a covenant of your unfailing love; mercifully grant that this person may be delivered from the slavery of sin through the new covenant, and obtain the promise of eternal life which you have given us in your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

This prayer gets at the heart of baptism—it's core meaning. And it gets at the heart of baptism by taking us back to the Exodus.

In the early chapters of the book of Exodus we read about the Israelites and how they came to be slaves in Egypt. In Joseph's day the Pharaoh had invited them to live in Egypt during the great famine. He showed them favour. But Exodus begins by telling us that a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. He made slaves of the Israelites and they cried out to the Lord for deliverance. The Lord heard their cry. Through Moses he called Pharaoh to release his people. And Pharaoh refused—repeatedly. Through nine plagues Pharaoh continued to refuse to

release the people from their bondage. But the tenth plague was different. The Lord warned Pharaoh: release my people or the firstborn of every family in Egypt will die. Still Pharaoh refused. And so Moses went back to the Lord and the Lord gave him instructions. Death is the consequence of sin. Sin is, at its most basic level, rebellion against the God who created us. And so death was coming to Egypt as the consequence of Pharaoh's rebellion. But Israel was to be spared. The Lord gave Moses instructions for what would be the first Passover. Despite Pharaoh refusing to let them leave, they were to prepare to leave anyway. They were to quickly bake unleavened bread for the journey and each family was to slaughter a lamb. They were to eat the lambs, but first the Lord instructed them to paint the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of their homes. When the angel of death made his flight through Egypt, taking the lives of the firstborn, he would, literally, "pass over" the homes of the Israelites who had painted their doorposts with the blood of the lamb. Death was coming as a consequence of sin, but the Lord would spare all those for whom a lamb had been sacrificed.

The next day, having experienced the judgement of God on his sin, Pharaoh released the people from their bondage. In fact, the Egyptians hurried them on their way, we're told, and even gave them gifts of gold and silver. They'd seen the judgement of God and wanted no more of it. But once the Israelites were gone, Pharaoh had second thoughts. He organised his army and sent his soldiers and his chariots after the Israelites. The Lord led his people

as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, but somewhere in the land of swamps, tidal basins, canals, and lakes between the Nile and the Sinai Peninsula the Egyptians caught up with them. They were cornered between the army and the sea. And yet the Lord had directed the people to that very spot. He'd even told Moses that Pharaoh would be changing his mind about letting the people go. Why? So that the Lord could display his glory.

As the chariots approached, the Lord caused a wind to blow all night, pushing the waters back. The Israelites crossed the sea on the dry ground left by the receding waters. Thousands and thousands of them passed through the waters of the Red Sea with the Lord following them in the cloud and in the fire. We're told that in the morning, as the Egyptians tried to follow their wheels got stuck in the mud. The soldiers started to panic. And the Lord told Moses to again raise his hands over the sea. As the day dawned the waters washed back into place and the army, bogged down in the mud, was drowned.

The Lord had spared the lives of his people in the Passover and then he had rescued them from the slavery of the Egyptians by leading them through the waters of the Red Sea.

As they Israelites stood on the far side of the sea they sang about their deliverance:

"I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

The LORD is my strength and my song,

and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him. (Exodus 15:1-2)

The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake,

I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.

I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.'

You blew with your wind; the sea covered them;

they sank like lead in the mighty waters.

"Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?

Who is like you, majestic in holiness,

awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?

You stretched out your right hand;

the earth swallowed them.

"You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed;

you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode. (Exodus 15:9-13)

You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain,

the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.

The LORD will reign forever and ever." (Exodus 15:17-18)

The Lord was continuing the project he had started with Abraham—a project to create a people for himself and a kingdom that would bear witness to his name amongst the nations. Forever after Israel would look back on these two events: the Passover and their rescue at the Red Sea as

constituting the birth of their nation. The Lord had spared them from death, he had rescued them from the bondage of their enemies, and then he led them to Mount Sinai where he gave them his *torah*, his law. He made them his people as he led them through the waters of the Red Sea, and at the mountain he established his covenant with them: he explained to them what it meant for him to be their God and from them to be his people.

And so it's not without reason that when John the Baptist came to announce that the kingdom of God was at hand and to call the people to repentance, that he gathered them in the wilderness at the Jordan River, and called them to pass through the waters there—to be baptized—as a way of preparing them for the kingdom that Jesus was bringing. It's not without reason that Jesus instituted baptism in water as the means of entrance into his kingdom and into his covenant. Brothers and sisters, we are born in bondage. Not the Egyptian slavery of the Israelites, but a slavery to sin and in bondage to death as a consequence. What God did for Israel all those millennia ago prefigured what Jesus would do for all humanity.

In Jesus, God became incarnate—he became one of us, one of his own creatures. As St. Paul writes in Philippians: "Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:6-7). And as if that weren't sacrifice enough, "being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to

the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). In his death on the cross, St. Paul saw Jesus taking on the role of the Passover lamb. Those lambs were sacrificed for the sins of the people every year. A lamb could never deal completely with sin, once and for all. But the Son of God could. In fact, Jesus took this role of the Passover lamb on himself in the Last Supper, the night before he was handed over to suffering and death. He celebrated the Passover with his disciples, and yet it was a Passover with no lamb. Jesus was to become that lamb once and for all. Just as the blood of those sacrificed lambs served as a sign for death to pass over the Lord's people all those centuries before in Egypt, so the blood of Jesus painted on our hearts means our escape from judgement on our sin. At the cross, Jesus paid the price for our sins; he took the full force of the wrath of God against our treason; he died the death that we deserve that we might be restored to God's friendship and fellowship.

And yet how do we take hold of Jesus? How do we, so to speak, paint his blood on our hearts? We do so by passing through the waters of baptism. God gives physical signs to his people that express spiritual realities. When he established his covenant with Abraham, he made circumcision that sign. In fact, when he gave Abraham instructions about circumcision, he didn't say, "This represents my covenant", but "this *is* my covenant". Circumcision embodied the Lord's covenant promise and was the means by which Abraham and his sons took hold of the Lord and his promises in faith. Not to be circumcised was, the Lord said, to be "cut off"

from him. The sign was the thing signified. Baptism serves the same purpose in the New Covenant that Jesus has established. He died for our sins. He rose that first Easter morning in triumph over sin and death. He ascended to his throne. He is Lord. And he calls us to take hold of this reality, to take hold of him, to take hold of his kingdom through baptism. These waters embody his promise and we find redemption and life and membership in his covenant as we, in faith, pass through them—just as the Israelites found themselves a new people as they passed through the waters of the Red Sea and met the Lord at Mt. Sinai.

Bothers and sisters, we pass through these waters in faith and Jesus welcomes us into his Church and into his kingdom. There's no magical formula here. There's no hocus pocus. Baptism is not a talisman to protect us or our children from evil. It was never meant to be the indiscriminate cultural practice that it has become in many places. Again, in baptism the Lord offers us his promise of redemption and life—escape from our slavery to sin and our bondage to death. These waters are his covenant. And if we will pass through—and he calls us to bring our children with us, just as he did the Israelites—if we will pass through *in faith*, we are taking hold of his promise.

We also need to be reminded that Jesus did not promise an easy journey. The Lord rescued Israel at the Red Sea, but led her into the wilderness. Jesus promises the same. But as the Lord fed his people and cared for them in the wilderness, he promises to care for us. Our side of the covenant is to

follow him in faith. Our side of the covenant is to live out the freedom from sin he has given us. This is why St. Paul rebuked the Christians at Corinth for tolerating gross sexual immorality. On the one hand it's good to know that we aren't the first generation of Christians to struggle with sin and how to deal with it. The first generation of Christians struggled with it too. But Paul wrote to them in regard to that sin: "Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7). It's a reminder that in his death and resurrection, Jesus bought our freedom from sin and death and that in our baptism we have laid claim to that life and that freedom—so let us live the new life he gives. In baptism we lay claim in faith to the covenant promises of God. Let us now live the life he gives. To quote St. Paul again, this time a passage from Romans that was at the heart of our Easter Vigil: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4).

Let us pray: Almighty God, who delivered your chosen people from slavery in Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea and established with them a covenant of your unfailing love; mercifully grant that we may be delivered from the slavery of sin through the new covenant, and obtain the promise of eternal life which you have given us in your

Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.