

Feb. 18, 2024
First Sunday in Lent
Gen. 22:1-18, James 1:12-18, Mark 1:9-15
“Down in the Valleys”

When you think about it, the Christmas story has a lot to do with people looking for the baby Jesus. Shepherds go looking for the baby the angels spoke about. Strangers from the east travelled long distances looking for a new born prince. Even Herod sent his soldiers out to look for this new born prince and in the process looks for every small boy in Bethlehem to have him killed.

But in today's Gospel reading, John the Baptist didn't have to go looking for Jesus. Jesus suddenly appears in front of John and then John is bit surprised to hear Jesus say, *“Baptize me too”*.

This all confuses John. He knows he's not worthy to untie Jesus' sandals, in fact, Jesus should be baptizing him. “Jesus, you're the great Messiah we've been waiting for. You don't have any sins to repent. You don't need to be baptized.”

But then John baptizes Jesus and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove and God makes a grand divine pronouncement saying, *“You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you.”*

Here, being baptized, is the very Son of God. This man, with water dripping from his head and face, is God himself but no sooner had Jesus been baptized, then the descending Spirit casts Jesus not upon the throne up at the palace, but alone out in the wilderness.

There He meets, not the Mayor who gives him the key to the city, but Satan who tests and tempts Jesus with *“If you are the Son of God then do something to prove it”*.

The next time Jesus hears those words *“If you are the Son of God then do something to prove it”* will be when He hangs on a cross and hears the taunts of a howling crowd.

What happened to the man who proclaimed the good news that God has sent the Messiah? Well John falls victim to the whim of a murderous king and his head is served up on a plate at a party.

Look how quickly the mood has changed in the Gospel story. From the glory of angels telling of a new born Saviour to the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, the gruesome beheading of John the Baptist and much closer to Jesus' birth, is the slaughter of the baby boys of Bethlehem.

Excitement and mountaintop experiences are great like what we heard last week on the Mount of Transfiguration but they don't last. They are precious and special because of the very fact that they don't last.

Eventually we come down off the mountaintop and resume life down in the valley. All the hoopla of Christmas has gone. The Christmas decorations have been packed away. There are no more angels, and stories about a miraculous birth.

We are here at church and there's not the same excitement as at Christmas. We are back into the ordinary days of the year and the very ordinary problems that come with life that is very ordinary.

Today we hear about Jesus standing in the very ordinary muddy waters of the Jordan River with John the Baptist pouring some of that water over him. In that act of baptism Jesus, God in the flesh, is identifying himself with the ordinariness of this world and ordinary people and their ordinary lives of sin and temptation and trouble and sickness and dying.

This is the great thing about our Christian faith. Christianity is not just about mountaintops and the glory and the ecstasy of being lifted up to places beyond the ordinary.

It isn't about always singing happy songs or always being filled with so much faith that nothing can trouble us or get in our way. Our Christian faith is also for the valleys.

Most of us don't live in a world of perpetual bliss and happiness; we may wish we did; we would like to but in reality we don't. We live down in the valley, where there is work to be done, laundry to be washed and folded, people to deal with, troubles to be confronted.

But here's the good news: that's where our God meets us. And isn't that exactly what the angel Gabriel had told Joseph in a dream. Mary's child would be the presence of God among his people – that He will be known as *'Immanuel'* which means *"God is with us"*.

Jesus' baptism becomes the occasion for the Holy Spirit and God the Father to state that Jesus is God's Son who has come into the world, and through His baptism in the Jordan He is also revealed as an ordinary person who identifies with the ordinary things of our world.

In our baptism, God meets us in our very ordinary world. He comes to us. He embraces us. He encounters us in the very ordinary matters of every day, not just the mountaintop moments and exhilarating spiritual experiences which we have every now and then, but he comes to us in the far more frequent ordinary moments of every day – the struggles, the boredom, the questioning, the pain, the grief, the torments, the doubting and the temptations.

That's where God meets us. Down here in the valleys where we wouldn't expect to find him – and that's where He is ready to embrace us and remind us that He is our loving brother and saviour.

The heavenly Father meets Jesus in the undignified muddy waters of the Jordan saying, *"You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you"*. And so also God meets us in our baptism through Jesus and says, *"You are my own dear child. I am pleased with you"*.

Baptism is God's work, not ours. It's God's grace coming to us and adopting us as his own. In becoming God's own dear child, God's grace claims us, loves us, saves us, restores our friendship with God, rescues us from Satan's power and gives us eternal life.

The beauty of the Christian faith is that, yes it does give us some of the high times of spiritual fellowship; of divine experience and what I call, mountaintop experiences, and these mountaintop experiences are different for each person.

For some the closeness of God might come through an "Aha" moment when reading the Scriptures or listening to a live rendition of Handel's Messiah or sitting quietly in a magnificent cathedral. For some it might be a vibrant hand clapping, beat thumping, contemporary Christian band playing to a large crowd of arm waving people.

But more importantly I believe, our Christian faith gives us strength and comfort in those rather inglorious moments when we struggle and are on the brink of defeat.

In the dark valleys our God says to us, *"You are my own dear child"*, I am with you; I will not give up on you; I will hold you up when you are sinking; I will carry you when you are too weak; I will walk with you through the dark shadows of death into eternal life.

We need that kind of assurance because we are tempted to limit God's presence in our lives to only those times when we can *feel* His presence and it is usually during those highs that we really feel that God is near and sense that God has had a powerful impact on our lives.

We get excited when those times happen and it's fine that we have these stirring feelings related to our Christian faith, after all a relationship with someone is an emotional experience but these emotional experiences are more the exception than the rule.

God's presence in our lives is not limited to the times we are consciously aware that God is with us. He is with us whether we are aware of him or not. That's the true comfort that God wants to give us today, that He is with us in our own personal valleys.

In the 1970s the people of El Salvador were down in the dark valleys of suffering. Thousands of people were unjustly imprisoned, beaten, tortured and murdered.

Many simply disappeared never to be heard from again. Priests and nuns were tortured and murdered. The people of El Salvador were in a dark valley and must have wondered why God seemed so far away.

Until Bishop Oscar Romero said,
God is not failing us when we don't feel his presence. God exists, and he exists even more, the farther you feel from him. When you feel the anguished desire for God to come near because you don't feel him present, then God is very close to your anguish. God is always our Father and never forsakes us, and we are closer to him than we think. Oscar Romero was assassinated in 1980 for speaking out against the injustice in his country.

When Jesus endured the agony of whip lashes and taunts of the people and then suffering on the cross, He was encouraged by the voice that He heard from heaven on two occasions, at his baptism and then on the Mount of Transfiguration.

On both occasions the voice of His heavenly Father assured him, *"You and my own dear Son"*. These words gave him the strength and courage to keep on going through the darkest of all valleys as He carried the sin of all the world.

To know that in the very ordinary world of suffering and pain that He was experiencing, the Father in heaven had an extraordinary love for him, enabled Him to endure all things and to show extraordinary love for all humanity.

The One who calls us His own dear children enables us to walk through the darkest valleys of our ordinary worlds. In the waters of baptism He calls us *"my dearest child"* and He promises to walk with us through thick and thin, even when we fail to be whom we should be as his children.

So in conclusion it's easy to appreciate Jesus' presence up on the mountain tops of glory and praise but it's down in the valleys, that's where we really need Jesus and we really need to hear our Father say to us with His comforting and loving words, *"You are my own dear child"*.

We are in good hands, no matter what situation we are in, through the good times and through the hard times, we belong to the Lord and we know that the Lord is good.

May God bless us and keep us in Jesus' name we pray. Amen