Today is a celebration of the baptism of Jesus and of our own baptism. Today we can also celebrate the waters that give us life.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all describe the scene as Jesus is baptized by John on the banks of the Jordan, but only Matthew includes a conversation between John the Baptist and Jesus. This interchange not only shows John's humility, it explains Jesus' request to be baptized. Jesus answers John's objection to baptizing Jesus by saying that it should be done to fulfill all righteousness, a word which for us doesn't always have good connotations, but in scripture means fulfillment of God's law. John has already been preaching about God's demands and baptizing people as a pledge to fulfill them in their lives: Don't think that your ethnicity gives you special privileges and exemptions, feed and clothe the needy, don't bully anyone, don't engage in extortion, be truthful, repent. Then Jesus comes along and asks to be baptized. For Matthew, Jesus' baptism signifies a public announcement that he has come to fulfill the promises made by the great prophets of Israel, an announcement that is ratified by the Father. He is the fulfillment of the beautiful poem/prophecy of Isaiah's Suffering Servant, Jesus has been sent by God with a mission of righteousness-to live a life that is wholly committed to that mission.

And God responds in a theophany or what might be what the Celts call "the thin places" between this world and the next. God is making a public announcement to the crowds about who Jesus is: the one sent by God. Jesus' baptism is the sign that he accepts his mission. The Father then sends Jesus the empowering Spirit. The rest of the gospel describes how Jesus lives out his mission to fulfill his Father's will.
Probably, everybody in this chapel has been baptized. What have we been taught about baptism? How do we think about baptism? As salvation from limbo? As an initiation into an elite group? A sign of God's particular favor? As an indelible mark on the soul? As cleansing from sin? As an infusion of sanctifying grace? As an initiation into a faith tradition that has been alive for thousands of years? Certainly, it is a pledge to live our lives according to the teachings of Jesus. We can also understand baptism as a pledge to align ourselves with the power of the Spirit which is always oriented to life, which celebrates, values and honors the life which is God's life in all creation.

In this pluralistic, globalized world we are much more aware of the goodness and richness of other faith traditions. When we affirm our own baptism we need to affirm God's presence in the lives of those who have not been baptized, but who are also God's children. Our reading from Acts 10 describes the pervasiveness of God's life. No one is excluded from God's love and we all stand in need of grace.

The waters of baptism also might put us in mind of the waters of our earth that are so endangered: from the rivers of Appalachia whose headwaters are choked with toxic rubble from mountaintop removal to the springs raided by companies who steal their water from indigenous peoples to fill plastic bottles, to our plastic-filled oceans where fish, coral and other forms of life are disappearing.

Pope Francis has issued an urgent call to care for our common home, so this prayer might be another way to honor Jesus' baptism and ours" that "The waters of baptism join us with the waters of creation and the call to care for the earth's fragile yet wondrous ecosystem." * Amen

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