January 13, 2018

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

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The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord is sandwiched in the middle of the Catholic Church’s National Migration Week (January 6-12) and the celebration of Martin Luther King’s Birthday (January 21). Homilists might ask themselves how the themes around migration and the life of Dr. King are connected to the baptism of the Lord.

What are the qualities of the servant described in the First Reading and John the Baptist and Jesus in the Gospel? What do these characteristics have to do with justice and peace?

The servant described in Isaiah 42 is the first of four servants described in Isaiah. Though the Jewish people expected a military/political hero, this servant would enter the scene quietly. As he will not break a bruised reed, we might ask ourselves what we want or expect of our own leaders. While national political leaders, from the executive and legislative branches, attempt to score points with voters and soldiers by claiming that they support the re-strengthening of our armed forces, is this really want the world needs, what will benefit the most marginalized people, what will bring peace and economic security to all? I don’t think that Isaiah’s servant would bother with showy and expensive military parades or expanding a military force, especially that is already stronger than the next eight strongest militaries in the world.

I am struck by a few characteristics of John the Baptist and Jesus in Luke’s version of the baptism of Jesus. The lectionary editors omitted a few verses, but Luke explains that Herod imprisoned John the Baptist for a number of reasons, including his fiery message surrounding baptism (Luke 3: 17, “...He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire”). According to Luke, this kind of message was one of the reasons why Herod imprisoned John.

Are we willing to speak as boldly as John the Baptist was? Though we might not be physically imprisoned, the man whose life we celebrate later this month, Dr. Martin Luther King, spent a
lot of time in US prisons last century for speaking and acting as boldly as John the Baptist. May homilists remind listeners this week and next week that King was cut from similar cloth as John the Baptist.

Luke also states, “And a voice came down from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased (Luke 3: 22b).” Just prior to God’s stamp of approval of Jesus, Jesus was baptized and was praying. May our witness for justice be similarly grounded in prayer.

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