

We follow Jesus' life after Christmas, and one of the highlights is the story of his baptism. In this version from Luke, a couple of things really stand out. First, his own experience of baptism is an experience of Grace. Many sermons and commentaries focus on the beautiful words from God/Spirit: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Words of affirmation, words of Grace... which apply also to each and every follower of Jesus. Can we hear the words for ourselves: You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased!

But then the second thing that stands out in Luke's story, is what happens right after Jesus is baptized! He is sent out into the desert, into the wilderness, for 40 days, as a time of testing, a time of temptation. So all in one story we have two major themes of faith: Comfort and Challenge, or since speakers like alliteration, I chose to call it Grace and Grit! The first points to our God of steadfast Love and Mercy, and the second points to Jesus' insistence that his followers must take up their cross, that his followers will be persecuted, as was their teacher and all the prophets before him.

The truth of Christian life is that we need BOTH aspects of baptism to be truly following Jesus. We need the primary sense of Love and Grace, that God is truly with us, helping, healing, guiding us in life. And we need that second aspect of outward practice, putting love into action where it is most needed, loving even enemies. We often hear about an Inner Journey, finding inner peace, and an Outer Journey, facing the challenges, trials, even devils of this world. Actually... BOTH journeys are so intertwined that we start to face the world's trials and evils in our inner journey, deep inside ourselves, to free ourselves, to heal ourselves from what some call "inner demons." That is the idea behind Jesus going alone into the wilderness. Being "tempted by the Devil" can

be one way of saying that he was facing his own inner demons and destructive thoughts.

The simplest example is that of hidden and suppressed anger. It is easy to see that someone who was abused as a child, is prone later in life to abuse others, unleash that inner anger at others, blame others. This adult can feel like a victim for an entire life, feeling abused and mistreated even when no such thing is happening. There can be “projection” that most people in the world are mean and abusive, because feelings were not faced and explored in an honest and thorough manner the first time around... the feelings are simply repeated as an echo, as a projection, whether based in reality or not.

Perhaps Jesus could sense that he was not 100% Light! ... that he had some of his own shadows to face, his own temptations and trials... we remember his words later in life... “Father, take this cup from me... yet not my will, but thy will be done.” The image of Jesus praying *alone* in the wilderness represents the *inner* work and *inner journey* that Jesus himself had to do.

We all have destructive thoughts and self-absorptions, and they are specific to each of us. We all have specific challenges, unique to our own situations in life. Let me share just a few words (lyrics) from a song called “Journey Down.” This wise songwriter (guess who!) reflects the thoughts of therapist Carl Jung, that we all have a “shadow side” or “shadows” deep inside that must be faced honestly if they are to be healed: *I have railed against religion for the evils it has done. I have seen the road less traveled down which I might have gone. Felt the growing thunder of liberation’s storm. But I am locked inside this prison my history has formed. I am tied and bound. Going to take that journey down... **Hello shadow, I am coming down to meet you. I only want to know you cause I know I can't defeat you. Coming to make***

peace with all the friends and foes and phantoms I will find, walking down the stairway of my mind. This next part is so specific to the unique shadows of this songwriter, since he had large audiences and plenty of applause....*Well, I know the journey is frightening and I'm begging for some time. I want to find myself in rhythm, I want to lose myself in rhyme. It's another composition from the minstrel of the day. When the clapping is finally over and the audience goes away, I'm tied and bound. Going to take that journey down! Hello shadow, I am coming down to meet you. I only want to know you cause I know I can't defeat you. Coming to make peace with all the friends and foes and phantoms I will find, walking down the stairway of my mind.*

Yes, we all have various shadows and crosses to bear; no one escapes challenges and trials in life! Some are just bad luck or chance or various physical maladies. Some things we bring upon ourselves. And some crosses to bear are a direct result of following Jesus, as his path for greater peace and justice takes much courage or grit, and is often persecuted and crucified.

But for now, let's revisit the primary part of baptism: Comfort and Grace! "This is my beloved son (daughter) with whom I am well pleased!" Imagine Jesus alone in the wilderness, facing his own temptations, his inner demons, yet remembering the beautiful comforting words he heard as a dove came and rested on his shoulder. It is the Grace and Love and Real Presence of God that allows us to risk the journeys inward and outward. It is a Grace of a "beloved community" (such as Belleville) that gives us the strength and "grit" to face the inevitable trials in life. So... we need to remember and rehearse the words heard at our own baptism, (whether an older or infant baptism)... "You are my beloved son (daughter) and with you I am well pleased!"

These Days devotional booklet begins this winter season with the question, “Where do you feel closest to God?” This is the promise... that God is “with us,” Emmanuel, as close as our very breath, so we do our part to contemplate how we experience this. The writer asks, “Is it in the woods? At a favorite vacation spot? In church? In your own quiet place, deep in prayer? Is it listening to some great music?”

You know that I really depend on the latter... music as one deep form of prayer! The following song, Be Not Afraid, is based on this morning’s reading from the prophet Isaiah. It is a song that includes BOTH aspects of being baptized in God’s Spirit.. both the Comfort of God’s presence and help, and also the Courage to face a world full of “wicked tongues,” “raging waters,” “powers of hell,” etc. We need songs of comfort, just as Jesus probably needed the comfort of a dove lighting on his shoulder before starting his mission in this dangerous world. We always need songs of Comfort, and this song, I hear, is the most frequently sung song at Catholic funerals.

So... Life is difficult: sickness, persecution, and death, but through it all, the Spirit continually says: “Be Not Afraid: I go before you always, and with you always!” (Ross sings “Be Not Afraid,” by Bob Dufford, S.J., Society of Jesus)