

Teaching Through Icons at St. Sebastian Parish

The Baptism of the Lord



“And straight coming up out of water, he saw the heavens opened and spirit like a dove descending upon him: and there came a voice from heaven, saying, thou art my beloved son, in whom I am pleased” Mark 1:10-11

Traditional icons of the Baptism of the Lord are an exact reproduction of the Gospel testimony, with the addition of detail corresponding to the divine service of the day in Orthodox Churches, for instance angels and allegorical figures at the feet of the Savior. In the Eastern Church the festival of Baptism is also called Epiphany, since Baptism is the manifestation of the Divinity of Christ, when Jesus openly begins his service to redeem the World. The **Epiphany** (revelation) of the Holy Trinity is also known as **Theophany** which literally means a “*revelation of God*” in Greek.

*“It is not the day when Christ was born that should be called Epiphany, but the day when He was baptized”
St John Chrysostom,”*

The Baptism of Christ is a Gospel event with meaning and truth that goes far beyond the simple action of baptism. We can see those teachings in most traditional icons.

Christ is Naked

The symbolism of this icon is deep and rich. *Jesus is naked, or nearly so.*

Christ is purposely depicted with little or no clothing. But why is that significant?

In Genesis, man and woman were created together in God's image. They were both beautiful, and while they lacked physical garments, they were clothed in the glory of the "image" and "likeness" of God. However, when they fell into sin, they hid in shame until God brought them garments of skin to wear (which symbolizes the sinful tendency that now obscures our true nature). Their natural beauty was transformed into an object of shame. Adam and Eve fell, and with them fell creation.

Jesus represents the second Adam (1 Corinthians 15). In shame and nakedness, Adam hid. Christ comes in his majesty, both as God and man, both in glory and nakedness completely unashamed, representing the beauty of the undefiled human made possible through Him (and in the subsequent centuries, Christians were often baptized without any clothing, shedding the garments of the "old life" to die in Christ and be resurrected in Him).

The Heavens are Opened

The icon depicts the "finger of God" (in some icons this "finger" is depicted as a sword) and the presence of the Holy Spirit (represented by the **Dove**). Saint John Chrysostom emphasizes that the Gospels state "*the Heavens were opened;*" the Spirit descends upon us so that we can ascend with Christ and the Spirit to the Father in Heaven. For the first time since the fall of humanity, the Heavens were opened to us.

The Jordan River is Both Water (life) and Cave (death)

In the symbolic language of the icon, Jesus is represented standing above the waters, which seem to form a cave behind him. This represents the dual truths of Christ overcoming death to bring life. In some icons Jesus seems to be standing upon a cross – the instrument of death that brings life.

John the Baptist Points to the Truth

Although John is baptizing Jesus, John is shown bent over in reverence to the Messiah. Despite being the baptizer, he is not central to the scene. This shows that the Baptizer must now "decrease so Christ may increase", John's teachings and role are not done away with now the Holy Trinity has been revealed.

Jesus is the New Covenant

Behind John the Baptism, in the cave, which represents death, we see the figures of Moses and David. They are seen passing on their devotion and authority to the Son of God.

The AXE Holds a Warning

There is an axe resting against the tree near John the Baptist. This reflects Christ's warning that our lives must bear the fruit of the Spirit or else we will be removed. We cannot get comfortable or spiritually lazy. *"And now also the ax is laid to the root of the trees: therefore every tree which brings not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire."* (Matt 3:10).

The Angels of Heaven Attend to Christ

The angels on the right side are waiting to attend and dress Jesus after the baptism is over. John the Baptist, while baptizing Jesus is usually turned away or looking at the Spirit descending upon Christ. This signifies that Theophany is about elevating Jesus Christ. If this were an Olympic race, it would be as if the Old Testament (John the Baptist and all before him) were passing the baton to the New Testament (Jesus Christ and all of the saints).

The Waters and the Creatures of the Sea Reveal the Divinity of Christ

In traditional Orthodox icons, Christ's hands are not shown in prayer, but in a sign of blessing. Rather than the waters of Jordan cleansing Christ, Christ cleans the waters. The waters of the sea are the source of evil and chaos throughout Scripture and so it is fitting that Jesus exercises power over them. This is why in the bottom of most icons, creatures of evil appear to be fleeing from the feet of Christ.

The Psalms say:

The Lord established the sea by his might. The Lord did break the heads of the dragons in the water.
Psalm 73:14

The waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you and were afraid; the abysses were troubled.
Psalm 76:15 –

The sea beheld and fled, [the River] Jordan turned back.
Psalm 113:3

Questions? Want to learn more? Contact Ed Duncklee – eduncklee@SaintSebs.org