

Sermon – January 9, 2022 – Baptism of the Lord - St James

Today we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord Jesus in the Jordan River. He was baptized by John the Baptist...his cousin. Some call John the ‘forerunner’. His mission was to announce the coming of one much greater than himself, sent by God. John lived in the wilderness. Dressed in camel skins, on a diet of locusts and wild honey, he offered something never offered to people before, a baptism of repentance, a baptism with water to wash away previous sins and to set a new direction to prepare people for the coming of The One. People came for this baptism. They wanted a new course. Then Jesus, the very One being announced came too. It was a significant revelation, that the one without sin, who needed no cleansing, joined in and took part in the ritual – and then the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove.

Some, particularly the faithful in Russia and the Ukraine believe that because Christ was baptized in the waters of the Jordan River, **all waters around the world are made holy on this special day.** Jesus was without blemish. He did not need cleansing by the water. So instead, a reversal took place. He bestowed on the water special healing and blessing powers.

It is believed that water everywhere consecrated on this day becomes holy Jordanian water, with special properties. That is why people plunge into it. This blessed water is taken home in containers preserved in houses and given to people who are seriously ill. A bit of it is usually preserved in houses until the next Baptism of the Lord.

Originally, both in the East and the West, the feast of the Epiphany (called “*Theophany*” in Eastern churches) celebrated three major events in Jesus’ life: the visit of the Magi; his baptism by John; and the wedding feast at Cana. In the West, the three events are celebrated as well in the season of Epiphany. The wedding at Cana will be the Gospel reading for next week, the second Sunday after Epiphany.

I am excited to show you a bit about how the Baptism of our Lord is celebrated in Russia because it is such a striking reenactment.

Today, Moscow builds about 60 outdoor tubs in the city. Dunking has become a modern-day phenomenon. Estimates suggest two million Russians submerged in icy water over two days of Epiphany a few years ago. (Susan Ormiston/CBC)

Water blessed by a priest on the Epiphany week in Orthodox tradition is considered holy and pure, and bathing is believed to have healing powers. Temperatures can be -10 C or lower.

Three times into the icy water cleanses the soul.

One each for the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Here is a video of Russian President Vladimir Putin doing the polar emmersion.

<https://youtu.be/F2tdTqWiQ4Y>

Russia has a growing number of people who say they are believers.



In Moscow's Church of Christ the Saviour, a worshipper prays at the divine service of the Epiphany. Russia has seen a steady climb in the number of people, young and old who say they are believers. (Corinne Seminoff/CBC)

Three young Russians come to the Epiphany ritual for the first time.



Trying to stay warm and psyched, three young Russians wait in line in sub-zero temperatures, bracing themselves for a plunge in the frigid Moscow River for the first time. They came to the banks of Moscow's most popular swimming hole. (Corinne Seminoff/CBC)

Holy water is kept at home for drinking and purifying the soul throughout the coming year.



People line up to get jars and bottles filled with Holy water blessed by the Patriarch of all Russia. They keep the water at home for drinking and purifying the soul throughout the coming year. (Corinne Seminoff/CBC)

Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church blesses a congregation.



The leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, blesses the congregation by anointing them with holy water. Part of the ritual of the Epiphany to cleanse the body and soul of its sins over the previous year. (Corinne Seminoff/CBC)

Russian rescue personnel help people into the water.



In Khoroshevo-Mnevniki on the Moscow River, hundreds of people come in the wee hours of the morning to immerse themselves in a hole cut in the frozen river. A wooden frame marks the spot, as Russian rescue personnel help people into the water and watch for any signs of cracking ice on the river, or of hypothermia. (Susan Ormiston/CBC)

Making their way to the river ...



Two girls shed their outer clothes in the snow beside the river and step quickly to the open water. At -11 C, with no wind, this Epiphany night was relatively mild. In some parts of Russia, people dunk in water at -30 and colder. The water is warmer than the air.

One each for the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.



A woman emerges from icy water at Revolution Square, just steps from the Kremlin. Those who brave the dunking describe it as 'magical,' 'euphoric' and 'spiritual.' (Corinne Seminoff/CBC)

The water is blessed by the priest.

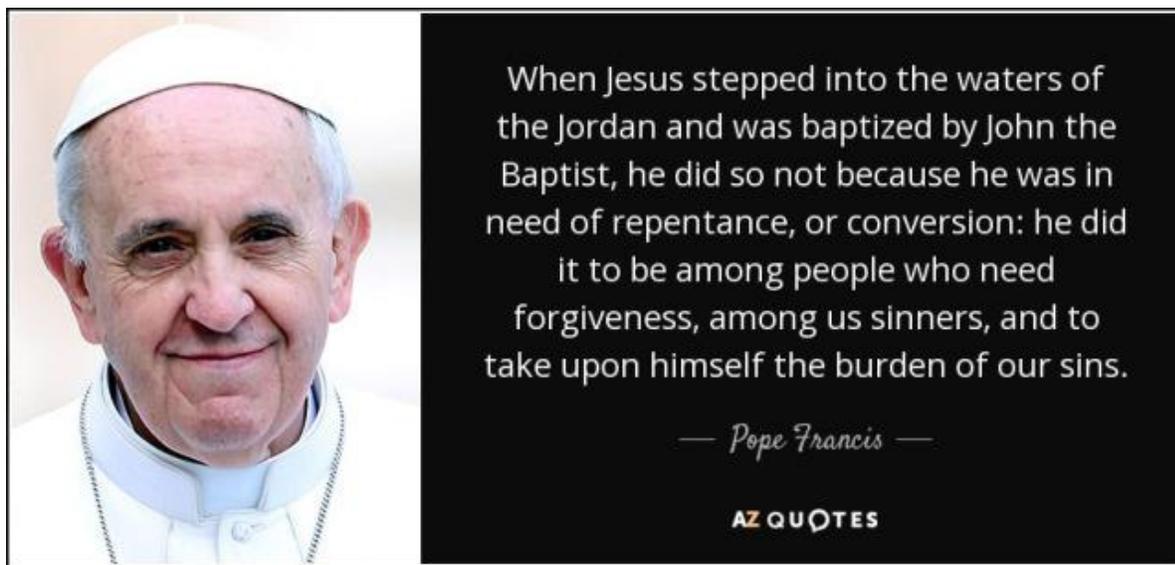


His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Russia blessing the water at the official Epiphany ceremony in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. (Susan Ormiston/CBC)

I hope you find this interesting! These practices point dramatically to the Baptism of our Lord and its importance. We could march down to Jones Lake and cut a hole or cross in it. I could say a blessing and we could have our own plunging spot, but I think that's a bit beyond us, although please let me know if you would like to consider that (joking).

But I **will** say a blessing over water in our font at the end of the service and if you feel comfortable, I invite you to take home a small jar of this blessed water...It is an invitation to faith...faith that God does work in and through his creation as we believe it happens in the waters of Baptism.

But what we take away today from the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord is most emphatically that our Lord is with us...appearing unexpectedly to help us shoulder the burdens of human existence. Pope Francis puts it well in this slide:



Our Lord isn't afraid of getting wet with us. He wasn't afraid to even die for us to unite us with the Divine.

So let us give thanks for Emmanuel, God with us. Take home some blessed water. You might want to sprinkle it around your home or sprinkle it on yourself or simply let it remain in its jar...a reminder of our Lord's cleansing power. Amen.

Luke 3:15-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” …

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”