

Homily for January 10, 2010 (Baptism of the Lord, C)  
St. Augustine/St. Monica Parish, Detroit  
*Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Titus 2:11-14, 3:4-7; Luke 3:15-16, 21-22*

Not too long ago, grey hair was considered a liability in corporate America. Today, in the wake of a recession that was fueled in part by financial immaturity and excessive risk-taking, grey hair is increasingly considered an asset. *The Financial Times* (Jan. 2, 2010) recently had an article on a new trend among businessmen: *adding* touches of grey and silver to their hair!

Jonah Disend, the 37 year-old CEO of a company in New York, recalls that several years ago he was worried about his grey hair—not that he had too much but rather that he had too little. A colleague then even suggested that he dust his temples with talcum powder so that prospective clients would take him more seriously!

According to one Washington DC-area stylist, six years ago only 2% of his business was hair coloring. Today it's 22%--and 80% of it is "grey blending." But others question whether all this salting, sprinkling, and touching up is really necessary. A New York stylist told the *Times*: "If any Wall Street type came in asking for grey to be added now, I would generally underscore that the current climate of his chosen profession will soon take care of the graying."

The more I thought about this story the more it reminded me of putting lipstick on a pig: it may look a little different, but it is what it is! Good decisions—and bad ones—are usually the result of something more substantial than hair color. Appearances and wisdom or intelligence don't necessarily go hand in hand.

Today's feast challenges us to ask whether people might say the same about us and baptism. What difference has it really made for us to have received the outward signs of immersion in water, anointing with oil, a white garment, and a candle symbolizing the light of Christ?

God meant for it—and us—to make a difference!

When Jesus presented himself to be baptized by John at the Jordan, it marked an important transition. John's baptism had been for repentance, to prepare the hearts of his people for not only Jesus' baptism—"with the Holy Spirit and fire"—but also for his ministry. Scripture scholars suggest that one sign of this transition was the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove over

the waters: the sign of a new beginning, just as when Noah released the dove after the Flood (see Genesis 8:1-22).

As our first reading reminds us, new beginnings are part of what God is all about. Writing in the part of Isaiah known as the Book of Consolation, the prophet announced that God would make a way for the people of Israel to return back from exile; and today God still makes a way for his people to be reconciled to him.

Part of responding to our baptismal call means “making a highway” in our hearts for God to move and work: filling in the valleys that the holes or empty spaces in our lives; leveling the mountains that are the excesses; smoothing out the rough parts. What we do as individuals we also need to do as a Church. One of the great images that Vatican II recovered was that of Church as Pilgrim, *ecclesia semper reformanda*, the “church always reforming.”

We just celebrated at Christmas the time when, as St. Paul’s Letter to Titus says, “the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared.” God, our second reading tells us, “saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he richly poured out on us through Jesus Christ our savior.”

That grace, Paul added, not only saves us but also *trains* us: (1) “to reject godless ways and worldly desires;” and (2) “to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age.” In an age too often marked by excess, injustice, and disrespect and indifference toward other people and even to God, this is truly “an alternative lifestyle.”

With the celebration of today’s feast, we officially bring an end to the Christmas season on our liturgical calendar. Tomorrow we begin Ordinary Time. However, as the late minister and civil rights leader Howard Thurman cautions us:

*When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among others, to make music in the heart.*

It’s in the “ordinary times” of life that the real meaning of our baptism can be tested the most and certainly the most often. The same goes for our “ordinary places:” home, school, work, church, and neighborhood. Just living, most of us find, will give us plenty of grey hairs! May they also be accompanied by a deeper wisdom. +