

Year A Baptism of the Lord Matthew 3 vv13 to 17

Jesus' baptism is recorded in all four Gospels but only in Matthew's Gospel, that we hear today, is there a conversation between Jesus and John the Baptist. These are Jesus' first words spoken in this Gospel and they give us a window into Matthew's primary emphasis for Jesus' mission. These words of Jesus, though, are – at first hearing – not very clear in their meaning. Jesus has said, in response to John's reluctance to baptize him, that his baptism will fulfill all righteousness. What does that mean? Let's find out by, first, backing up a little to refresh our memories on what Matthew has already told us about Jesus.

In the first verse of his Gospel story, Matthew introduces Jesus to us as "Jesus Christ, the Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham" and follows this up by providing Jesus' lengthy, and quite extraordinary, family tree. Matthew includes four women in Jesus' lineage. This alone would be controversial and their back stories – one is a prostitute, one the married woman who has an affair with King David – make their inclusion even more controversial. Of course, King David is mentioned, too, in reference to having had the affair, and there is the poignant reminder of the Babylonian captivity – the result of God's people having turned their backs on God's ways. Matthew's point is clear. After many long years along a winding path of hardships and moral blunders, years of tears, years of yearning for the Messiah, Jesus has come as the fulfiller of God's promise made long ago to Abraham. He has come to make things right.

His conception and birth are a wonder (1:18-25) and his early days and years are marked by angelic voices and visions of guidance in the night (2:1-23). These astounding heavenly things are but a prelude to the main act we see today. Our little baby hero bursts onto the scene in today's story as an adult ready for action.

He comes to the Jordan River seeking the baptism of John and John throws up the stop sign.

“You want me to baptize you?” John says. “It should be the other way around.” I think it is likely that most of us agree with John’s logic. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, completely without sin. John’s baptism is a baptism of repentance. It is a confession of sins and the cleansing away of those sins. Jesus has no need of this.

Jesus’ answer to John’s reluctance is rather unclear, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” John then gives in and baptizes him because he knew what Jesus meant by this.

Our roadblock to understanding what Jesus means is our definition of “righteousness”. If I asked you to think of a righteous person you would likely wrack your brains to think of someone who is good, someone who is ethical and moral, follows all of society’s rules, and treats others with compassion and respect. But that leaves us with our problem. Jesus *is* righteous according to our thinking of what righteousness is and so this still leaves us wondering, “Why does Jesus need to be baptized?”

Our definition of righteousness is only a part of the meaning Scriptures provides for us. Righteousness, in the Old Testament especially, is more than just moral and ethical behaviour. Righteousness involves our relationship with God. For example, after hearing God’s promise to make him the father of a vast nation through whom all the peoples of the earth would be blessed, Abraham “believed the LORD, and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). Abraham was righteous because he trusted God, not because he was morally

perfect. Human righteousness is being in right relationship with God – our belief and our faithfulness to God's ways. God's righteousness, then, is God's faithfulness to the promise of the world's salvation.

John's baptism for repentance and the cleansing of sin is the first necessary step to being in right relationship with God. Jesus did not need this step but he walked into the water to be baptized by John in solidarity with the people he had come to save. As the Messiah, Jesus is not only the way to wholeness but also the Davidic king, the representative of all the Jewish people before God. And so, he stood with them in their brokenness to bring them to wholeness.

By showing up at the Jordan River, by being baptized by John, Jesus is also validating John and John's baptism. God has sent John as the messenger, the one coming before the Messiah to announce his coming and prepare the people. God led the Israelites across the Jordan many years earlier so that they would be God's people, living according to God's ways. Now Jesus, walked into the Jordan to lead God's people once again into relationship with God. Jesus has come to claim his own leadership of God's people to lead them into God's kingdom with him.

Jesus was the first person to undergo a new baptism. Not only plunged into water as everyone else had been plunged into water at the hands of John. Jesus was plunged into water and bathed in the presence of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' baptism the sign of water and the reality of God's kingdom meet. The heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended, God spoke. God's kingdom had arrived in bodily form – God dwelling on earth, Jesus of Nazareth. His baptism was sign of water and God's kingdom united together, opening the door for us into God's kingdom. How do we enter this door? Paul explains in his letter to the Romans:

“Do you not know,” he writes, “that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore,” he continues, “we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom.6:1-5).

Baptism is not merely a welcoming ceremony – our baptismal certificate is not a membership card. Baptism is our intense, personal encounter with the Almighty God who created us and all things – God anoints us. God claims us. We enter into God’s kingdom, a new creation clothed in the righteousness of Christ. This only needs to happen once.

When Jesus walked into the water of the Jordan River, we walked with him. We may not see the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descending. We may not hear the booming voice claim us as a child of God but that is exactly what happens to each and every one of us. Baptism brings us into relationship with God, able to live in God’s kingdom and to, eventually, experience the full perfection of the kingdom.

Life for us, in the meantime, is a life moving constantly towards the fullness of this perfection just as Jesus’ life was – “to fulfill all righteousness,” Jesus tells us...to bring all creation into right relationship with God. Isaiah shows us what this life of fulfilling all righteousness looks like: “I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations,” God declares through the prophet. “He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching” (Is.42:1-4). Matthew echoes this peaceful, loving rule foretold through Isaiah. “Blessed are the peacemakers!” Jesus declares later in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus’ rule will be marked by nonviolence and humility (5:5). His rule will not be accomplished through massive military strikes but through healings with justice (12:15-21), not destroying the enemy but loving them (5:43-44), and through giving them the light of his love and his teachings. God’s righteousness is both the victory over evil and the establishment of justice – not the human version of justice which means the doling out of prescribed punishments. God’s justice is found in the acceptance of the invitation to live in perfect peace and love. With this acceptance, comes the forgiveness of all that has gone before.

Jesus, as God’s righteousness, gives to us the gift of righteousness which is right relationship with God. But the God who said through Isaiah, “I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you” now takes us by the hand and calls us to righteousness. As Christ’s body on earth, as bearers of his Spirit, we too are summoned to ‘not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.’ We are now participants in the covenant, part of the light to the nations, fellow fulfillers of God’s righteousness in Jesus: to open with knowledge of God the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon of the world’s addictions and desires into the true freedom of God’s love, from the prison those who sit in darkness we bring into the light of Christ.

There are many things in our world that are not all right. There are personal problems, social issues, cultural and gender inequalities and injustices, economic

and political woes. Matthew shows us in his Gospel “that God in Jesus lays healing hands on our universes and begins to make us and our worlds ‘all right’” (p.111 of *New Proclamation Series A*). Matthew shows us Jesus’ passion for righteousness and how those who encounter this passion begin to share in it. The Sundays after the Epiphany ahead of us will reveal this passion to us in the stories of those who follow Jesus and, in following him, they worship him, the one in whom God is manifest to us. The revelation of his divine sonship begins today with his baptism – the revelation to the world began with the baptism of Jesus and the revelation to *us* begins with our baptism: when we are baptized, we too receive the Spirit and we too are identified as beloved children of God. We are baptized with Christ and into Christ, so that God’s plan of righteousness might be fulfilled in us and through us (adapted from [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org); Mark Allen Powell). God says to each of us, about each of us, “This is my Child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

In her book of meditations called *Remember Your Baptism*, Jeanne Finan ends with this one:

Baptism is completely free, but it will cost you everything.

Yes, baptism is free. You don’t rent the church or pay the priest or purchase the [oil] – it is pure gift. It is not only pure gift from a parish, it is pure gift from God. On the day of your baptism, you say *yes* to God, and God says *yes* right back to you, in the beauty and power of all those outward and visible signs. But God’s grace, freely given, has been with us long before the moment of our baptism. The reality is that God actually says *yes* to each of us from the moment we are formed in the womb, from the microsecond we are created in God’s image. Maybe even before that.

Saying yes to God and to baptism does not end our journey but starts it from a new place. We have journeyed, some of us longer than others, to this day of our baptism, but the yes keeps on working...Our baptismal yes keeps acting throughout our lives, sometimes seen and sometimes unseen, to touch us and to touch the lives of others. ...

Consciously or unconsciously, everything changes with our baptism. It is through remembering that we begin to reflect on the transformation given by this sacrament.

When we begin to recognize what it means to be marked as Christ's own forever, as we begin to live into the fullness and deepness of Christ and of that forever, it is enough to take our breath away.

Still, we sometimes mistakenly think that everything will be easier in our lives. We've chosen Christ, so now we will live in the world as Christ's chosen ones and our lives will be perfect. Only good things will happen to us, and we will be rewarded with all our heart's desires. Open the Bible at almost any point and you will quickly see that this line of thinking is not new, but it also does not go very far, in scripture or in real life. We remember our baptism and begin to understand that it offers us comfort in the wilderness but it will not prevent us from experiencing the wilderness.

When we fully recognize that we are marked as Christ's own forever, as we begin to live into the fullness and deepness of Christ and of that forever, we are faced with making choices that will not always route us down the easiest or most comfortable path. We remember our baptism and choose.

If anything, claiming our Christian name and identity makes our life journey more difficult. Now we travel the journey with an awareness of who we really are and who we are called by Christ to be. It is never easy to live a life of authenticity and credibility. Yes, baptism is completely free, but it will cost you everything.

Remember your baptism. (p.91-94).