

## Matthew 3:1-17

The last thing we hear about Jesus prior to his encounter with John is the move of Jesus' family to Nazareth after the death of Herod. After leaping over much of Jesus' childhood and early adulthood, Matthew introduces John the Baptist nearly exclusively to point forward to Jesus' narrative reappearance. That is, John's narrative function is solely to "Prepare the way for the Lord's coming! Clear the road for him!" All four gospels credit him as the herald of Jesus' adult ministry.

Unlike the shepherds and Magi, John does not have a place in the Christmas creche or pageant. Jesus' cousin cuts a rough figure, depicted here as an ascetic and unpleasant person, offering a bitter pill for his audience to swallow. We are to imagine that the coat of camel skin would have been worn with the hairy side brushing against the skin, so as to provoke discomfort. We are to imagine him lean, possibly even emaciated, owing to his diet of nothing but bugs sweetened by honey. His angry cries are disrespectful of the religious authorities of his day. His message to the crowds is ominous, portending apocalyptic judgment, complete with imagery of the winnowing fork and the burning of the chaff.

Although Matthew depicts John as frightening, if not crazed, there is more to the story of John. Matthew suggests here that his

message had a wide appeal and that people came from Jerusalem, all Judea, and regions beyond to confess their sins and be baptized in the Jordan. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing at the end of the first century, provides more information about John the Baptizer than he does about Jesus, suggesting the popularity of this figure in at least some Jewish sources. According to Josephus, John is arrested and eventually killed by Herod Antipas, because he attracted crowds, and Antipas, like many authoritarian rulers, feared crowds as a potential source of rebellion. Antipas was probably justified in his fear that the activity of John the Baptist would tap into a longing of the Judeans to be free from the cruel occupation of their Roman overlords.

As the biblical scholar John Crossan reminds us, John doesn't just baptize in any pool of water. He baptizes **in the Jordan**, a river infused with great nationalistic longings. The story of the Israelite Exodus, which begins with the parting of the Red Sea, culminates in the crossing of the Jordan into the promised land. So, the crowds coming to John for baptism **in the Jordan** are tapping into the expectation that their repentance is but the first step in an apocalyptic scenario in which freedom from political oppression is the ultimate outcome.

Apparently, Jesus' coming to be baptized by John was

somewhat problematic. What does this Baptism by John mean? Does this mean that Jesus had a human teacher? Was he once a disciple of John? Did he sympathize with the nationalistic longings of his people who also sought cleansing in the river Jordan? Whether one imagines the relationship between John and Jesus as one of master and disciple; rival teachers; or that of a prophetic, somewhat scary, forerunner paving the way for the Beloved Son of God, their earthly fates are the same: both of them meet a brutally violent death at the hands of violent political forces – John beheaded, and Jesus crucified.

So, if Jesus was the Messiah, why in the world would he need to be baptized by John? That Jesus would have allowed John to baptize him apparently poses some theological problems. Does Jesus need to seek repentance through John's baptism? If John is incapable of even carrying Jesus' sandals, why would Jesus seek John's baptism? If Jesus would bring a baptism of "Holy Spirit and fire," why does he need a baptism with mere water? If Jesus would preside over the judgment of the world, why would he need to seek repentance?

It is not surprising then that these narrative and theological tensions lead to John's hesitation. What possible purpose could Jesus' baptism by John serve? If anything, John is the one in need

of Jesus' powerful baptism, not the other way around. And yet, Jesus' baptism is essential according to Matthew. This is Jesus' first public act and so unquestionably important in the Gospel narrative. After all, the first two chapters of Matthew narrate events which happened **to** and **around** Jesus. He is just a child in the travels to Bethlehem to Egypt and finally Nazareth. Now that Jesus acts directly, now that he has stepped out onto the narrative stage as an adult, what tone does this scene set? Why is this first step in Jesus' earthly ministry so significant?

With the exception of Mark's gospel, who records the story of the Baptism of Jesus by John in a straightforward manner, each evangelist struggled with this question. Matthew's discomfort is perhaps most palpable. He solves his dilemma by two deft additions to the tradition he inherits from Mark: First, Matthew's John protests: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" In John's skepticism we sense Matthew's skepticism. Then, Jesus acknowledges the awkwardness of the situation and gives both of them an out by saying: this is a temporary condition ("let it be so for now"); and in this way they "fulfill all righteousness." So for Matthew, baptism is a collaborative effort: "Let it be so for now; for it is proper **for us** in this way to fulfill all righteousness." John must concede to baptize Jesus; Jesus must seek the baptism of John. Together, their obedience to God's plan is a step on the path of righteousness.

What might 'fulfilling righteousness' mean? The Greek term can encapsulate some complex notions of justice, uprightness, correctness, innocence, and redemption. Matthew calls Joseph righteous when he intends to end his relationship with Mary quietly. In the Sermon on the Mount, those who yearn for righteousness and are oppressed because of their pursuit of it, will receive God's blessings. Overall, righteousness is an internal quality, but also a matter of external practice.

So "to fulfill all righteousness" likely means acting in obedience to God in a way that coordinates internal inclinations and external actions. Jesus' first steps in public ministry are a combination of a compliant spirit and a powerful, public display of his obedience to God's call.

And while Matthew and his colleagues solve this initial problem of Jesus being baptized by John, Christians ever since have struggled with a second question: Why is Jesus baptized at all? Given that we typically connect baptism to forgiveness of sin, if Jesus is the sinless Son of God, in what way does he need baptism? Or, more broadly, how does baptism benefit him at all?

On this point, all the evangelists agree: Baptism is not simply a mechanism for forgiveness, but rather announces God's favour

and establishes Jesus' identity. For example, in Matthew's account, the voice from heaven announces that Jesus is God's Son, the One with whom God is well pleased. Baptism, for Jesus, was less about forgiveness than it was about commissioning, the inauguration of his mission and ministry and assurance of God's presence.

Typically, the ones baptizing are assumed to have more authority than the ones being baptized. Furthermore, John baptizes "for repentance," something Jesus should not need. In John's gospel, John does not actually baptize Jesus, but only bears witness to his coming, and in an apparently similar apologetic move, Luke notes that John is imprisoned by Herod in the verse immediately before the baptism of Jesus is acknowledged, as if to give the impression that Jesus' baptism is agent-less - there is no baptizer involved.

As important and interesting as these differences may be, all four gospels share two plot-related features that are key to interpreting this passage in a meaningful way. First, in each account, Jesus' baptism is accompanied by the giving of the Spirit, and in three of them, it is accompanied by a voice from heaven pronouncing Jesus God's beloved Son, a child with whom God is most pleased. Whatever else Jesus' baptism **may** mean, it certainly **is** the place where he learns definitively **who** he is in relation to

**whose** he is. At his baptism, Jesus is given the intertwined gifts of identity and affirmation.

This points to the second important plot element of the gospels: Jesus' baptism precedes the commencement of his public ministry. In John's account, this begins with the calling of the first disciples. In Matthew and his synoptic cousins Mark and Luke, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness immediately following his baptism and only then begins calling followers. In all four, the theme is clear: the gift of identity precedes mission.

We might even go further and say that only by having a clear sense of God's affirmation and identity can Jesus take on the enormous mission in front of him. This is poignantly clear in Matthew and Luke, where the Tempter's point of attack is precisely at the question of identity: **"If** you are the Son of God." Satan calls into question Jesus' relationship with his Father because he knows that Jesus is vulnerable to temptation precisely to the degree that he is insecure about his identity and mistrusts his relationship with God.

And this is where these stories of Jesus' baptism intersect with our own stories. For we too can only live into the mission that God has set for us to the degree that we hear and believe the good news that we, too, are beloved children of God. As with Jesus, we too

discover in baptism **who** we are by hearing definitively **whose** we are. Baptism is nothing less than the promise that we are God's beloved children: that no matter where we go, God will be with us; that no matter what we may do, God is for us and will not abandon us. In baptism we are blessed with the promise of God's Spirit and given a name, and that name is Christian, one who is marked with the cross of Christ and named a beloved child of God forever.

This matters tremendously because names are powerful. The names we are given or take, the names that arouse pride or shame, are important and affect our lives. Some we have chosen; others have been given to us. Some lift us up; others tear us down. Whatever the case, names are powerful. This story promises, however, that no matter how powerful our earthly names may be, they do not define us. What defines us is the name given to us by God alone: the name of "beloved child."

I invite you to take a moment to remember some of the more difficult names you may have been called during your lives, the names that no matter how long ago they were uttered, endure in your memories, dogging you through the day and haunting you at night: names like "stupid" or "egghead" or "fatso" or "ugly;" names like "loser" or "know-it-all" or "victim" or "useless" or perhaps racist or ethnic slurs. Recall these names for one painful moment so that



you can hear God say to each of you, “No! That is not your name. For you are my beloved child, and with you I am well-pleased.”

And today we learn that we, like Jesus, we discover **who** we are by hearing once again **whose** we are; God’s own beloved child. We may be living at a time when the question of identity has never been more pressing, as there are so many sources from which to receive and construct our identities: our jobs, our professions, our ethnic origins, the city we grew up in, the schools we attended, the organizations we belong to. Yet, very few if any of these names or identities are life-giving, and certainly none are redeeming.

No wonder this gift of identity and affirmation is one of the great themes of the gospels, as it sends us out from the sanctuary armed with our primary name – **Christian** – that we may face the various challenges and opportunities before us knowing that we are God’s own beloved children. You are God’s own beloved Child – this name – is truly powerful.

Luther tells us that when we wash our faces in the morning, we need to remember that we are children of God – and that our identity was sealed in baptism. Jesus needed this assurance in the days to come. And we need to know who we are before we walk out in mission, in our shared work of exploring who we are as beloved

children of God, as a beloved congregation of God.

Baptism is an important sacrament in the life of the church. For many it is a cleansing of sins, for some it is an entry rite into membership in the community of faith, and for others of the faith it is a dying to sin and rising in faith and righteousness.

Through the revelatory events of the story, the opening of the heavens, the descent of the dove, and the affirmation of Jesus and his coming ministry, we see that this is no ordinary baptism. This baptism is different. In it we get a clear sense of who Jesus is as God acknowledges Jesus from the heavens as “my Son.” It is a profoundly important moment as Jesus is about to encounter the testing in the wilderness and the beginning of his public ministry. We hear the affirmation of Jesus and witness the preparatory act for completing the tasks before him. And we also hear God who says to anyone being baptized, “I love you,” “You are mine,” and “I am pleased with you.” Powerful affirmations to receive from our Creator!

Jesus submits to his baptism as a fulfillment of God’s righteousness. Some believe this act was not only a modelling of submission and a consecration to his coming mission, it was also an act of being in “solidarity with sinners.” Standing in solidarity with those who often felt unworthy of God’s love and grace is a powerful

act that is vividly portrayed in this story and throughout the ministry of Jesus.

Being part of these moments, whether as pastor, parent, godparent, or congregant means witnessing the magnitude of God's redeeming love and abundant grace in the baptismal waters and rite. Witnessing the coming of the Spirit reminds us that the Spirit comes to all those baptized to empower persons for ministry in the service of God in a variety of ways.

Infant baptism is the primary baptismal practice for us, but for others – a believer's baptism, or adult baptism is the choice. Some sprinkle, some pour water, some prefer immersion. Whatever the practice or mode, no matter how much water is used, and regardless of the location - the Spirit, like the dove descending on Jesus in Matthew, is present in the act of baptism and infusing the baptized with the possibilities of a new beginning to follow Jesus and do God's will.

In the gospel, the very first thing Jesus does is become baptized. It happens before he speaks, heals, teaches or begins his ministry in any way. But as soon as he's baptized, watch out, he's on the move. Our calling is similar. We are baptized for action. We are baptized to go out into the world and be the hands, voice and

presence of Christ. Often, we think we are baptized for our own benefit, but in truth we are baptized for the sake of others and for the sake of the world. We are called to make Christ known.

What will you do this day to live out your baptism? How will you proclaim, through word and deed, that you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever? Whatever you do, may you be bold in your actions and faithful to your calling as a beloved child of God.

**Amen.**

**Prayers of the People**  
**Baptism of our Lord Sunday January 8, 2023**

PRAYERS (Jesus, Living Water ... **Hear our prayer**)

*In the waters of baptism, we were made God's children and called to serve one another as we have been served by Christ. Therefore, let us pray for one another and for all people who will not or cannot pray for themselves.*

Redeeming God, we give you thanks and praise that in your mercy you brought us to baptism, and there, by the power of the Holy Spirit, gave us Jesus' holiness in exchange for our sin and impurity. Thank you for our parents, grandparents, or godparents who brought us up in the faith and to baptism. Thank you for those other people whom you used to witness to your presence in their lives and to bring us the gospel. And thank you for our pastors and teachers in the faith.

Jesus, Living Water ... **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for the baptised people of God, that we may hang on to your promises in true faith, especially when we experience the wilderness of sin and evil within, and sinfulness, temptations and trials from outside. Strengthen us with your Holy Spirit so that Jesus' victory may be our victory.

Jesus, Living Water ... **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for all people, that the good news of Christ will be proclaimed and heard by all people, and that many will believe and be baptised. To this end, send, equip, and support pastors, deacons, missionaries, teachers, and lay people that they be able to give truthful and loving witness to your lavish love in the life of your Son, Jesus the Christ.

Jesus, Living Water ... **Hear our prayer.**

Have mercy on those in need, those who are struggling because of domestic violence and break-down, those who are suffering from trauma brought on by harmful behaviour by others, and the many emotions experienced due to conflicts and hurtful relationships. Heal, restore, and renew dear Lord.

Jesus, Living Water ... **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for the sick, those who are disabled, those in hospital, those facing death. Show them the light of the gospel; provide helpers and carers and medical resources; and heal both body and soul. Be with those among us who are sick, injured, or recovering from surgery, and others whom we name in our hearts ...

Jesus, Living Water ... **Hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, you have shown us your love and salvation in the baptism of your Son. Accept these prayers of your children in the name of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Amen.**