

Matthew 3:13-17  
The Baptism of Jesus  
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell  
1-12-20

---

I want to start with a simple question: are you ok? Not in terms of the big issues surrounding us in the world, but inside you, is everything ok? This question is a question that is at the heart of the story we're going to look at this morning. It's a question that is before all of the people who are gathered around Jesus in the passage we're going to read in just a moment. I put it before you and ask

Maybe there are some here who answer that question rather quickly, "yeah, everything is pretty good." Or maybe there are some who equally quickly reply, thinking: "everything is not ok." Secret...or maybe it's not a secret, none of us are really ok. We all need help in one way or another, and that's why we're gathered here together in this place and in this way to look together at who Jesus is. We've been in a series in the book of Matthew that spent the fall looking at what Jesus taught, then during Advent, the past and history of the family and lineage from which he came. Now in the weeks and months to come we're in part 2 of that series in which we're looking at the meaning of Jesus in our lives.

At the time of his birth Jesus was given his name, and do you know that the name Jesus translates "God saves." Jesus is the one who saves us from our sins. Today we are going to look at a story in which we see a way in which Jesus saves us from our sins—it's the very first scene recounted of Jesus as an adult, after the telling of his birth. The story that begins Jesus adult life and ministry is the story of his baptism. And by way of introduction I want to set the scene. The setting is the River Jordan, out in the wilderness. And on the banks of the river is a man named John who is speaking to the people and what he is asking them is the question we've already asked ourselves: are you ok?

There are many people gathered in the wilderness and not in the temple around this wild and compelling man, who wore camel hair clothes and ate locusts and who spoke God's word in a very challenging way asking the question to everyone: are you ok? Do you know, right now, if you stand in the right place or in the wrong place, not on the outside, but on the inside. And John says that if you are ok inside and everything is fine, stay there on the banks. But if you know that you are not ok and that you struggle, then come down to the banks and get in the river. And I want you for a moment to imagine you are there too, and the question is placed before you: "are you ok? Are you standing on firm ground with God or are you sinking some place else? Is there some circumstance or idea that is holding you captive, is there some failure that you just can't shake, or some addiction that has you in its grip? If any of this is true then come down and step into the river. And Matthew's gospel tells us is that something remarkable happens next, let's listen...

**Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup>John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" <sup>15</sup>But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. <sup>16</sup>And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God**

**descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved,<sup>(a)</sup> with whom I am well pleased.”**

In these few verses there is so much, so much about God’s promises and baptism. So I want to start with these first two verses. First, Jesus came to the river to be baptized. Does anybody know that the ordinary Greek meaning of the word Baptize is? To wash. A man inviting people to a river to be washed in a religious ceremony was not an uncommon thing to see. This type of this was a common religious practice at this time, in which a person would be immersed for a ceremonial cleansing. This was a common thing. If a person were interested in becoming a part of the Jewish faith and didn’t know much about it, one of the things they would do is undergo this ceremonial cleansing rite.

But if you see this scene you will see that that is not what John is offering this baptism for. The people who are coming to be baptized by him are already Jewish, and clue to the reason these people were coming comes by the word that John uses in the prior verses, that word is repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. The hopes of all these people was that God would one day come near to this people. But in their understanding of this event there would need to be a period of preparation and getting ready for this to happen. And the way John describes this process is simply one word, repentance.

The simple definition of the word repentance is *turn around*. At this time, and its true for us now too, was that a person’s actions and attitudes and deeds flow out of the orientation of a person’s heart and mind. That if you want to change a person’s actions or their attitudes it doesn’t do any good to address the problem on the outside, but the source of the actions comes from the inside. When a person’s heart is inclined in the wrong direction they will always act in the wrong way, and that if their mind is pointed in the wrong direction, away from God rather than toward him, their feet will always go in the wrong direction. And if they would change, it would need to come from a revolution from the inside.

The word repent means, deeply, a revolution of the heart and mind.

When Jesus showed up at the river, John looked at all the people gathered around him and knew that everyone there even himself needed to repent. They all needed to have their minds turned. It’s easy to look at ourselves and see the things we wish we could change or the things we want to change, the thoughts or actions we do that we don’t want to. John knew that, and along came Jesus, and the reason he came was to be baptized, and John would have prevented him, Do you know why John would have prevented him? Because Jesus was the only one in that crowd who did not need to be baptized, he was the only perfect one. That means Jesus heart and mind are always pointed in the right direction.

John is taken aback, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” John knows the truth that Jesus is the one, who when our lives are adrift at sea, when we are seeking after all sorts of things that will not ultimately be good for us, Jesus is the only one who can truly give us the things for which our hearts yearn. When we are adrift there are all sorts of people, books, self-help gurus and philosophies, all sorts of people claiming to have what we need—some may be good, and some may help, and others may only lead us further away from where we should be. But one thing is always certain, that in matters of the heart, Jesus is always right.

Whatever it is that is causing you to feel distant from God, let it come into your mind. If it's anxiety, Jesus says: "you don't have to worry about anything. Cast your cares on me." If it's resentment and unforgiveness that you harbor against another, look to Jesus: "I have forgiven them, and I invite you into the joy and freedom of forgiving them as well." Every single time, and in every single situation in life, if we look to Jesus it would be the best thing for us, because Jesus' heart and mind are always right.

That's the first lesson, the second lesson is maybe a question you have already been asking, and if you haven't asked it yet, I can guarantee that you will ask it at one point or another. It's this: If Jesus is perfect and doesn't need to repent and be forgiven, why does he insist that he be baptized? If Jesus is perfect and without blemish, and if this is a baptism of repentance—of which he needs none—why does Jesus walk miles from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized?

The bible tells us that there were a whole lot of people who followed John, people with a host of different issues and problems, these were people with dirt, getting into a dirty, mucky water. Here at the river there was a whole mess of messy people. Jesus at this moment was not in the temple standing among all the righteous people, instead he is out in the alleyways with all the needy people who know that they are not righteous.

What Jesus tells John, which is the reason for his coming to be baptized, did you see it? Jesus says that his baptism was "to fulfill all righteousness." Now this sounds like a churchy word, and it is ok if its meaning is not immediately apparent to you—it wasn't to me either. All he is saying here is that God has a vision for what life in his creation should and one day will look like again. And I this will be realized if I get into the water now—still a little unclear? Of course it is.

What Jesus is saying here if you baptize me now, together with all of these people, you enable to come into being the thing that we have all been hoping that God would finally do. What is that? Not being

What these Jewish people were looking for, and what you—whether you know it or not—are hoping for is this, that the God who is transcendent (up there), the God who cast the stars and holds them in their courses, the God who formed all creation by the Word of his mouth, that God (up there) would come down and be near to his people (down here.)

The hope that gets expressed throughout the Scriptures, especially in the Old Testament is that that God who is up there would come down and be near to us here. The Ancient promise is that one day God would come among his people.

Be like a mother, nursing her infant child -- Hosea

Like a father teaching their child to walk.

Ezekiel looked at the people and when god saw their suffering hearts, his heart was grieved. Like sheep without a shepherd, languishing because they can't get what they need. When God sees the people like this he makes a promise that he will come near to them and rescue them and be their shepherd. The ancient longing was that one day God would come near to his people and tenderly and lovingly shepherd them.

But there is this dreadful lie that continues to be perpetuated even today, one that I know every one of you have wrestled with this, it's the lie that God will indeed come near to his people, but only if

they are good enough. There are so many who suffer from this idea, the God will only come near to you when you are good enough. Even people who seek and love and serve still suffer under this false truth, that if things are not going well for them in their life its because God is disappointed with them or because they haven't done enough to please God.

Do you know why this is such a lie and such a wrong attitude, because of the place where Jesus went when he left Galilee. When Jesus left Galilee to go and be with his people he didn't go to the temple to the place where all the good, respectable, religious types were. He didn't go to the place where those who believed they were good enough and deserving of God's love and favor in their life. Jesus went from Galilee up to the place where the 'unwashed masses' of people who knew they were not good enough, and he gets in the water with them. Not because he needs to be cleansed, but because he wants to be near to us, even in the dirty river.

What this teaches us is that God always wants to be near to us, even in our miserable messes. He wants to come right near to us. The name Jesus, do you remember what it means? It means God saves. When the angel came to Mary and Joseph he said his name would be Emmanuel, God with us. This is how God comes to be with us, Jesus gets into the water and goes under that mucky filthy water with us.

Did you know that in our baptisms the image of being submerged, either literally when a person is immersed, or symbolically when the water is poured over a person, it's the image of going down into the waters and dying. Their old self went under the water and died there. You and I go into the miserable places in life where things and people and even ourselves are languishing and dying, and what we know from this story is that Jesus goes to these places with us. He doesn't stay in the holy temple and say when you get your act together then you can come to me. But Jesus buries himself in the water to be with us and let us know that he is there with us to lift us out of whatever mess or whatever mindset that is keeping us stuck.

Heavens were open to him and the spirit of God descended upon him

Jesus comes down and removes the distance between God and us.

Spirit comes down as a dove. This is the coronation of the divine king of all kings, and where does it happen? In muddy water among sinners.

Closing: Isaiah 53.