

Baptism—An Outward Sign
Matthew 3:13-17
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Last week we followed Jesus and his family to Egypt, where the baby Jesus stayed for up to two years to escape Herod's wrath and his secret order that all male children under two in the Bethlehem area be killed. The story ended with Herod's death and Joseph's return to Israel, but this time to Nazareth. And except for a glimpse of Jesus at age 12 returning to the Temple in Jerusalem with his parents and being left behind, we don't see or hear of Jesus until his emergence at about age 30, when two stories speak of his last steps in the preparation for his ministry which is about to begin. In the first of these instances Jesus is tested. Is he ready? Could the devil find a way to subvert God's plan for Jesus? Jesus passes with flying colors and that brings him to today's text, the last test.

Mathew 3:13-17 describes an event that happened near the Jordan River about 40 miles east of Jerusalem, and it involves a man who is out in this back country, preaching, telling folks to get ready, because the long promised one is coming. This wild man in the wilderness is John and the word is out, the people are coming to him, and he is immensely popular. Many think he is the one, but he isn't. John says he isn't. Matthew wants to make sure we see that, so let's listen to Matthew's description of that day, reading Matthew 3:13-17

Matthew 3

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.

14 But John tried to deter Jesus saying,

"I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?"

15 Jesus replied,

"Let it be so now, it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."

Then John consented.

16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water.

At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

17 And a voice from heaven said,

"This is my son whom I love; with Him I am well pleased."

There are some things that look wrong with this picture---Jesus was being baptized and Jesus was coming to John. First, shouldn't John be coming to Jesus? And second, didn't the Jews believe they did not need baptism? Weren't they already God's people, weren't they already chosen? When they were born, they were in. Baptism was something reserved for foreigners who wanted to become Jewish; they needed a physical washing away of their sins, but not a Jewish boy or girl; they were born into the fold, they were the chosen, God had already found them righteous.

No! John shouted to those he preached to. He told them they had wandered away from God and they needed to come home, they needed to repent, and if and when they did, they were to be baptized. Their sin was taken from them in repenting, but the baptism signaled something else.

That something else and even more is why Jesus came..

So, let's look at some of those reasons:

1. First, Jesus came announcing it was time, he was about to begin his earthly mission; he was ready; he had been prepared; the time was right; the Baptism was a sign, a signal, an outward sealing that God was acting in a new but long promised way. Think about this, every time God did a major act in history, according to the Bible, water was there to signal that it was God who was acting. Water is life, and each time God acted, God brought life or saved life or renewed life.
 - a. In the beginning God separated the waters and then created.
 - b. A remnant was rescued in Noah and his family from God's flood. his Israel crossed the Red Sea, parted by God, to escape Pharaoh and Egyptian slavery.
 - c. Joshua parted the Jordan so Israel could enter the promised land.
 - d. In the wilderness Moses struck a rock and God sent them water.
 - e. Even later, Israel was taken into captivity and by the rivers they hung up their lyres.

The list goes on, but make no mistake, God acting amid the presence of water is no coincidence. It was always a sign, a sign that God was doing something wonderful, and it is here again. John and Jesus' baptism fit this picture. God was saying, Jesus is about to begin for real and it's all God's doing. Doubt it? Look for the water.

2. Another reason, Jesus came and was baptized related to the Jewish belief that they didn't need baptism for themselves. Mistakenly, they thought they were in and didn't need it. But Jesus' baptism says two things to them: yes, you too need it, we all need it, and second, this ministry of Jesus is not meant just for you. This act of God is for the world, and to show its universality, Jesus willingly sought a baptism to show a solidarity with the world. What was about to happen was so much bigger than one tribe, one clan. It was and is for everyone.
3. Another reason Jesus needed to be baptized is to receive what a baptism really meant. It didn't mean you were saved; the Holy Spirit did that when you repented. Unfortunately, many look at baptism as a saving (salvific) event, but it isn't. That would make salvation works based – meaning we could do something to earn salvation. We can't. Salvation is a gift. God has given it to us, because God loves us, not because we're good or do the right thing. What baptism of the tribe really means is that we are marked with a sign, we have proclaimed to the world by the act that we belong to God. In the early days of Israel, God instituted circumcision as a sign of belonging to God, but that was only for half of the tribe ---the men. Baptism is for men and women, Jew and foreigner – for all the world. Baptism is a sign of being marked by God as one of God's own; it also refers to an inward sealing of our lives in commitment to God.
4. One other reason for the Baptism is that John was wildly popular. The crowds flocked to him and he had his own disciples. But John was not the one, not the

Messiah. Now here was Jesus, ready to step onto the stage of history, ready to preach the Good News, ready to call folks to repent, ready to bring God to the world. The competition would have been huge between these two men, if their roles were not somehow sorted out. So John Baptized to kick start the tide of Jesus that was coming, but then John and others heard the voice from Heaven saying, this one, the one being baptized –he’s the one. Those listening also got to hear John say he wasn’t the one, that he wasn’t even worthy to untie the sandals of the Messianic Jesus. John stepped back, Jesus stepped forward, and God approved it all by the use of the water of the Jordan.

So, today we have revisited this story of the first Christian Baptism—the baptism of Christ. It was God’s outward sign that it all was starting then and there. And by sharing in that baptism, we too declare by that same outward sign that God has called us, and cleansed us, and sealed us, and sent us. Today, we were supposed to ordain and install new officers. They too have prepared for their service, they have been tested, and they are ready. In our service today, we were to mark them with the laying on of hands; seeking God’s blessing upon them, Reminding them of their commitment, reminding them they have been called and marked, and filling them with the power and vision of the Holy Spirit. This is their day to being their faith mission as your leaders. My prayer will be for you to accept them and support them and love them, for they have been baptized, signed and sealed as God’s own and today they are being empowered. God loves them very much and God asks us to do the same.

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