

January 12, 2020

“Come to the Water”

Year A

In this week’s gospel, John tells Jesus: I need to be baptized by you. Jesus tells John: No, I need to be baptized by you. From a cynical modern-day perch this could be just so much polite posturing between preachers... after you... no, after you. We could be tempted to say why not just skip the whole baptism business and register on-line at the church of your choice. Just leave your credit card number for those annoying collections and I’ll see you next Christmas? An absurd suggestion? Of course, it is. But hopefully it illustrates a point. We must come to the water. We need to be baptized in water and the Spirit. There is no virtual reality, no computer-generated substitute. We must be physically and spiritually cleansed in the waters that flow over and unite the entire community of believers. Whether as consenting adults or as consecrated children we must come to the waters to be claimed for Christ.

Again, the cynic's rebuttal: What's the big deal? A little water – a dunk or a splash—a couple of prayers, what difference does it make? You're wasting a whole Sunday afternoon that could be spent watching a playoff game. (OOPS my bad). But infinitely long after Super Bowl 10,000 is forgotten, the waters and the prayers of baptism will still be written on our hearts. The grace of God will remain... perhaps ignored, even profaned, but undiminished as a source of strength and inspiration.

In this gospel we see that the tremendous power of baptism is evident right from the start. It is the first occasion in the Bible that unites the Trinity in full view and in celebration of God's love. In the form of a dove we see The Holy Spirit come upon Jesus to fortify him for his mission of redemption. We hear the voice of the Father acknowledging Jesus as his beloved Son and endorsing his ministry. And then there is Jesus. He arrives at the Jordan as a humble candidate for baptism and departs as the heaven-proclaimed Son of God. It is a brief plunge into a river, but a giant step closer to

realizing the entire purpose of creation. As both God and man, Jesus initiates his public life, setting a humble, loving tone that will mark his ministry from miracles to parables, from Cana to Calvary. In these four brief verses, Matthew proclaims that nothing in human history will ever be the same. The Son of God is among us. And he would bind us to him in the water of baptism.

That is where our own baptism comes in. In John 3, Jesus tells us plainly: Except a man be born again of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. It doesn't get any more necessary than that. Baptism is not a suggestion. Christ clearly calls us to the water. Baptism is not an optional induction ritual. It is God's own medium of saving grace. The Trinity, that was present at the Jordan, blesses each baptism; welcoming infants and adults, children and death-bed converts to the family of the faithful, washing them in the love of Christ.

The simple beauty and the awesome transformational power of baptism have been captured in song by another Matthew,

contemporary composer Matt Maher. With full acknowledgement and gratitude to the author, here are just two verses of his powerful:

“Come to the Water”

And let all who toil, let them come to the water.

And let all who are weary, let them come to the Lord.

All who labor without rest, how can they find rest,

Except for the Lord?

And let all the poor, let them come to the water.

Let the ones who are laden, let them come to the Lord.

Bring the children without might, easy the load and light,

Come to the Lord. Come to the Lord. Come to the Lord.

Come to the Lord.

In the course of his ministry of baptism John began pointing beyond himself and his baptism to the one who would baptize with Holy Spirit and Fire. Power and judgment – that was the marker of

the one who would follow John's baptism with water for repentance. The choice before us concerns whether we follow the way that leads to forgiveness and empowerment or to judgment recognizing that fire need only consume the chaff and not the grain. In the passage before us, John and Jesus come together, with Jesus coming to the river to be baptized by the one called to be his forerunner. As the moment unfolds, one will recede into the background and the other will take center stage.

As we contemplate Jesus baptism, we are invited to consider our own baptisms. Whether we were baptized as infants or in adulthood, with a sprinkling of water or full immersion – how does this sacramental act speak to our own sense of identity? How has it marked us? In what way have we become identified with the one revealed to be God's son in the baptismal waters?

The story of Jesus' baptism might present us with a dilemma. John preaches a message of repentance – but is Jesus in need of such an action? Was he out of step with God prior to this moment?

Were his sins washed away in the Jordan? While Mark's account might leave us with such an impression (Mark 1:9-11), such is not the case with Matthew. When Jesus approaches John, the baptizer asks that Jesus baptize him instead. Although Jesus doesn't baptize John, we see here Matthew's determination that we not consider Jesus in need of restoration to fellowship with God. Instead, Jesus tells John that he undergoes this baptism to fulfill righteousness. It is an act of obedience to the will of God. It is the necessary step prior to God's revelation of Jesus' true identity.

In the moment that Jesus rises out of the waters the heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and then a voice from heaven speaks: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Note the use of the word this in this version. The voice speaks not to Jesus, as in Mark, but to the crowd. It is a distinctly Trinitarian moment that connects us to the closing words of Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus commissions the disciples to go into the world, making disciples, and "baptizing them in the name of

the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit". For Matthew it is not that Jesus needs to hear his calling, but rather his calling is affirmed to the world. This is the one – hear him. But before his ministry can fully begin – the one who is filled with the Spirit and is affirmed as God's son will face a time of testing.

What might we hear in this passage that pertains to our own life of discipleship? How might we identify with Jesus and his baptism? Unlike Jesus, I expect all of us have some sense of needing to repent, receive forgiveness and be reconciled to God and neighbor. The first purpose for John's baptism would still seem to apply. But John makes it clear that we need more than to repent and be forgiven. That is the first step, but the second step is to be filled with the Spirit of God. In identifying with Jesus and his baptism, might we also receive this gift of the Spirit?

Moving further with this sense of identifying with Jesus and his baptism, this is a time of ordination for Jesus – he receives his anointing. In Matthew it's not a sense of adoption as son of God but

recognizing what this means of Jesus. His pathway is set out for him. Is not the same true for us? Is not our calling sealed by the Spirit in the act of receiving baptism?

Even if in this moment we don't see anything revealed about either death or resurrection, Paul makes the connection rather clear. In baptism Paul writes, we are buried in death with Christ and are raised to life (resurrection) with him "so we too might walk in newness of life".

Having become members of the body of Christ in baptism, we take on the identity of Jesus. We have been buried with him and we have been lifted up into life anew with him. Therefore, as we affirm our baptisms or perhaps receive baptism in this moment of the year, might we also receive the endowment of the Spirit and hear the voice of God claim us as God's own, that God might say of us, as we become one with Christ baptism, "this is my child, in whom I am well pleased?"

God love you!