

First Sunday after Epiphany – A

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

A fire and brimstone preacher was delivering his usual doomsday sermon about the end of the world. “Reform!” he boomed. “Reform your lives because sooner or later the signs of the end time will appear in the sun, the moon, and the stars. On the earth nations will be in anguish, distraught at the roaring of the sea and waves. Men will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the earth. The powers in the heavens will be shaken.” Then, lowering his voice, the preacher said, “God hasn’t told us when he would bring the world to an end. That’s not for us to know. It could be a billion years from now.” Whereupon a worried voice from the back of the Church rang out, “How long did you say?” “It could be a billion years,” the preacher repeated. To which the much relieved voice replied, “Thank God! I thought you said a million years.”

Undoubtedly, some will die of fright in anticipation of what will happen at the end of time. Whatever trials there may be, for those who follow Jesus it will usher in a glorious age whether it comes in a million years or a billion years or in the next minute. But John the Baptist is not anticipating the end of time. He is anticipating the coming of the Messiah. And he knows it will not be a billion years or even a million. He knows it will happen in his lifetime because God has sent him to usher in the Messiah. We recall his words: “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” John came to pave the way for the Christ.

And there is John preaching repentance at the Jordan River and baptizing all those who respond to his call. And suddenly it is the moment he has been waiting for. He sees Jesus approaching. But what transpires next is the last thing John expected to happen. Jesus wants John to baptize him. Why?

To John this seems a little backwards. Jesus does not need baptism. It is everyone else who needs baptism including John. And so John says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Perhaps this is how John has anticipated the Messiah’s ministry to begin – Jesus baptizes John and then everyone follows Jesus. But this is not what God has in mind, so Jesus answers him, “Let it be so for now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” In other words, I know the plan, and we better follow it. God’s plan does fulfill all righteousness. So John consents and baptizes Jesus. Now it is very doubtful to me that Jesus’ answer enables John to actually understand why this seemingly backward event should take place. Yes it is God’s plan, but why? It doesn’t seem to make sense. It certainly doesn’t explain it for me. What Jesus’ answer does do is to reassure John and us that this is the way it should be whether we understand it or not. John does not need an explanation. He simply needs to know that this is the way God wants it to be.

Jesus whole life and death does not seem to be the way any human would have written the script. We certainly wouldn’t have let him be born in a manger.

It sounds picturesque, but it's really just a smelly old barn. I remember growing up in Michigan, and when I would come in the house on a cold day and not close the door quickly enough, someone, usually my mother, would say, "What's the matter were you born in a barn?" I could have said, "Jesus was born in barn, what of it?" But I didn't. I missed my chance. Oh, well. I've missed a number of chances in my life, and I still seem to have survived ok. But Jesus lived his life in unexpected ways – from the manger to the cross and all the space in between.

Jesus lived his life for us, and his baptism is just one more example of that. John has not fully grasped that yet. But he does know the passage we heard from Isaiah which begins: "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations. 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." This passage is the first of four Servant Songs in Isaiah that all point to Christ.

This one is perhaps clearest of the four in its connection to the Messiah. The whole passage and especially the first three verses that I just read can be seen as a commentary in advance on Jesus' baptism – the Holy Spirit descending upon him and God's proclamation: "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." It can even be viewed as a summary of Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus comes to us humbly as our servant. He comes to die that we might live. He comes offering God's compassion to the weak and needy of the world – the bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks that Isaiah tells us he will not break or quench. We are all bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks at times. Servant Jesus comes offering us healing and justice. Servant Jesus comes to free us from our prisons and bring us out of the darkness and into the light. Servant Jesus comes to make all things new.

Theologians can't resist tormenting themselves over unsolvable questions. They can't stop themselves from sticking their fingers in the fan. Much ado is made over the fact that the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus now at his baptism and not at his birth or before. This raises troublesome questions in many people's minds. Did Jesus change significantly at his baptism? Was he unable to perform miracles before he was anointed by the Holy Spirit? Such questions are not only unanswerable, but very much mute, beside the point. We know who he is from this point forward. If he was in any way different previous to this, it is because that too was part of God's plan. That too fulfilled all righteousness. And yet we are still not comfortable with a changing Jesus. Theologians are not the only ones who like to trouble themselves with unanswerable questions.

My take, for whatever it is worth, is that Jesus did not change one little bit at his baptism. Why do I say that? Because Jesus' baptism was for us, not him. He did not need to change. He certainly didn't need a baptism of repentance, which is what John was offering. He has never sinned. Jesus' baptism was for us. Surely that is why the Holy Spirit descended on him. Surely that is why God spoke those words, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." He doesn't say, "This is now my Son." He says, "This is my Son." He has always been God's Son. The Father knows who Jesus is, and Jesus knows who he is, and he knows the Father is pleased with him. It is for those who were watching

and those who would be told over the centuries that need to know that Jesus is God's Son full of the Holy Spirit. Jesus lives his entire earthly life for us and not for himself. Why would his baptism be any different?

So the Spirit descending like a dove is a symbolic act for our benefit. Doves have been symbolic animals from the earliest of times. Doves were used as sacrifices and sold in the Temple courtyard to poor people who could not afford a lamb or goat. At her purification rite after the birth of Jesus, Mary offered a pair of doves. The dove is best known as a symbol of peace. This probably comes from the story of the flood where after the rain stopped Noah released birds in the hope they would return with a sign of land. The dove returned with an olive branch. Why is a dove chosen to communicate a sense of how the Holy Spirit alighted on Jesus? Perhaps because of the gentle way in which a dove alights. It is a most appropriate symbol for the Prince of Peace to be anointed by the Holy Spirit as a dove would alight on its nest. It helps to give us a sense of who Jesus truly is.

Jesus baptism was not for himself but for us. And it was the beginning event in his ministry, a ministry that was for us. Of course, all ministries should be for others. That is the nature of ministry. But other than Christ's ministry few if any are pure enough to be totally for others. We all have needs that our service fulfills for us, and that's ok. God understands that. But Christ's ministry is completely for us and not him. And Christ's ministry is ushered in by his baptism. That is why the Spirit descends upon him at this point. That is why the Father then declares him to be his beloved Son, all for our knowledge. So with his baptism, Jesus begins his journey toward the cross.

In chapter ten of Mark, James and John ask to sit at Jesus' right and left in his kingdom. And Jesus says to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" Jesus is not equating his baptism with his suffering and death. Rather he is saying that his baptism was the first step on the road that led to his suffering and death. There was no going back. "Let it be so now. For thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

So here stands John the Baptist on the bank of the Jordan. And he is calling for repentance and baptizing all who respond to his call. He stands tall and is very sure of himself and his mission. And then comes the one who John was sent to prepare the way for. John has described him with these words: "He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry." And to John's great surprise, Jesus asks John to baptize him. John says he's not worthy to carry his sandals let alone baptize him. And Jesus says, "Let it be so now. For thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." And so John consents knowing it must be the right thing to do because the Messiah has said so. But still in his mind, he is wondering why, why would the Messiah need to be baptized? He is about to find out.

John and Jesus wade out into the Jordan. The water is cold and current runs swiftly. And Jesus goes under the water. What expectations John may have had, we cannot say. But surely what happened was much more than he could have imagined. As Jesus comes back up out of the water, the heavens

open up and the Holy Spirit descends upon him in some form that can only be described as “like a dove.” And if that is not enough, and surely it would have been enough to convince John why Jesus should be baptized. But if there are still any scoffers in the crowd, God’s voice booms forth in a way that makes Charlton Heston’s voice sound like a whiney little girl. And the proclamation is given that the world may know: “THIS IS MY BELOVED SON, WITH WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED.” There could not be a more appropriate or dramatic beginning to the ministry of the Messiah than that.

Our own baptisms very much mirrors Jesus’ baptism. We do not see the heavens open or the Holy Spirit coming down like a dove. We do not hear God’s voice declaring that we are his beloved Son with whom he is well pleased. But the Holy Spirit is there, and God is pleased. And like Jesus, our baptism begins our mission, our mission of following him. In the waters of baptism we die to sin and are born to new life in Christ.

When Jesus asked James and John if they were able to be baptized with his baptism, they did not hesitate but said “We are able.” Jesus did not grant their request to sit at his right and left because it was not his to grant. But he did say to them, “The cup that I drink, you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.” And they were.

Jesus stands on the bank of the Jordan, calling to us, asking each one of us: “Are you able to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” And like James and John, each of us needs to respond, “Yes lord, I am able.”