

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 42: 1-9
SECOND LESSON: Acts 10: 34-43
January 12, 2020

“The Baptism of Jesus”

Sermon ©Lisa C. Farrell

Johnny was a typical preacher’s kid. He had a tendency to play church because he had to be there so much. So his mother didn’t think anything of it when she saw him one afternoon preaching to the cat. He had the cat sitting quietly while he waxed on about how cats should not eat birds and the need to avoid dogs. She smiled and went about her work, but a little while later she heard loud meowing and hissing and ran back to the open window to see Johnny baptizing the cat in a tub of water. She called out, “Johnny, stop that! Cats hate water!”

Johnny looked up at her and said, “He should have thought about that before he joined my church.”

Now if the cat had been Presbyterian the only thing that would be required would be a little water on its head.

Last week we talked about a “new thing” at the beginning of this New Year, the fact that God opened the doors for Gentiles to come into the family of God. Today we are talking about another new beginning—the start of Jesus’ ministry—his baptism.

Jesus came to John who was baptizing at the Jordan River. John’s baptism was unlike anything that came before. While Jews made frequent use of ritual cleansing, baptism was reserved for conversion. But John’s message was that people were so far away from God nothing less than a conversion experience was required—even for Jews. John’s baptism was about repentance and turning back to God. According to Matthew’s gospel when Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John, John tried to stop him. He said, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Only then did John consent.

We are often as confused as John was when it comes to Jesus’ baptism. Why would someone who was sinless need to be baptized? Isn’t baptism about repenting of sin and receiving forgiveness? The key lay in Jesus’ answer to John. Jesus told John to baptize him in order “to fulfill all righteousness.” Of course this is as clear as mud to us. What does *that* mean?

Jesus did not come to John to be baptized for the same reason as the others who came to John. Jesus was not overcome with a need to repent of his own sin. He did not have to “confess his sins to flee the coming wrath” as John put it. Jesus came to identify with us in our sinful state. And he also came to be baptized in order to “fulfill all righteousness”—which means to fully align himself with God’s will. When Jesus was baptized at the onset of his ministry he publicly declared himself to be at one with God’s will. He was doing what God the Father and the Holy Spirit desired. He was proclaiming that in all things he would do what was right.

We don’t always do what is right. We sin. There are things that we should do that we don’t do, and things that we do that we shouldn’t do. But Jesus **always** did the right thing. Righteousness in the Jewish sense of the word just means “right.” It is to do the right things in the right way and to be on the right side. I know I have said this many times before but my Hebrew professor in Scotland used to say that we over-spiritualize the word “righteous.” We make it into something fearful and extreme. But, he said, if his car was in perfect working order and everything was working the way it was supposed to, it would be “righteous.”

Jesus did not have to repent of personal sin, but through his baptism he publicly dedicated himself to following God’s will. As soon as Jesus was baptized and he came up out of the water heaven opened and he saw the Spirit descend like a dove and alight on him. A voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” At the point of his baptism he was met by the Spirit and the Father. All of God was present in that one moment.

John’s gospel picks up the story where Matthew’s gospel leaves off. John’s gospel was written much later and in some ways lacks the intimacy of Matthew’s. It sounds more formal. It even sounds like the two men did not actually know one another. According to John’s gospel John saw Jesus the next day and announced to all around, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

Since John did know Jesus, or at least they would have met from time to time as children, it sounds odd for John’s gospel to say he didn’t know him. It could mean, however, that he didn’t know that Jesus was the Messiah until that moment. We don’t tend to expect to meet the Messiah at a family reunion. Messiah’s are mysterious other-worldly figures. John testifies to the fact that he obeyed God who told him, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ And this is what happened.

We actually see John’s awareness of who Jesus is develop over time in the gospels. He knows him as a relative. He certainly knew that Jesus was such a good man that he didn’t need to be baptized. Then he was shown by direct revelation that Jesus was God’s Son. But later when John was in prison

facing death he doubted and sent word asking Jesus if he was the one, or if they should wait for someone else. Jesus responded, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” (Matthew 11: 4-5) These were all signs that confirmed that he was the Messiah.

Isn't it comforting to know that someone whose faith was as strong as John the Baptist struggled with doubt when he was suffering? If there is a crack anywhere it will show up when the heat is on, and we're all a little bit cracked. John ministered to the best of his ability, but he was human as we are human. His ministry, however, was vital to point the way. It was John who inaugurated the kingdom, by baptizing Jesus in the Jordan.

Having pointed Jesus out to his disciples, some of them left John and followed Jesus. That can't have been easy! But John knew from the get-go that his job was to do himself out of a job. Jesus quickly realized he was being followed and asked them what they wanted. They said, “Rabbi, where are you staying?”

“Come,” he replied, “and you will see.” They then spent the rest of the day with him and soon began to tell others that they had found the Messiah.

This sounds like a deceptively simple exchange, but nothing is ever simple in John's gospel. We miss the deeper levels of meaning because of language. “Where are you staying?” is “where do you abide?” Abiding is deeper than a mere geographical location. It is to dwell. Jesus abides with us and we with him. They wanted to know where they could find Jesus, but they also wanted to find the deeper presence of God.

What are we seeking at the beginning of this New Year? We can learn all kinds of facts about Jesus. We can study where he lived and what he did. But there is a difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus. While it is useful to know “stuff” what all of us really need is a deeper relationship with God—to know and experience God's presence and grace in our lives. Jesus came to bring us back to the right path and into a right relationship with God. He is God incarnate, a God who knows what it is to be human in every way. He is the God who will not break a bruised reed or quench a tiny flame. Jesus is the one who invites us to “come and see.” Amen

Isaiah 42:1-9

42 “Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.

² He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.

³ A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.

In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;

⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged

till he establishes justice on earth.

In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

⁵ This is what God the Lord says—

the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,
who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:

⁶ “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.

I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,

⁷ to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

“I am the Lord; that is my name!
I will not yield my glory to another
or my praise to idols.

⁹ See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you.”

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do 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.”

John 1:29-42

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

³² Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”

³⁵ The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. ³⁶ When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!”

³⁷ When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?”

They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?”

³⁹ “Come,” he replied, “and you will see.”

So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.

⁴⁰ Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. ⁴¹ The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). ⁴² And he brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter).