

## Down By the Riverside

Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism of the Lord

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### Gospel Reading

Our gospel reading this morning is Matthew, chapter 3, verses 13 through 17. This is Baptism of the Lord Sunday, and appropriately, we hear the story of Jesus' baptism from the Gospel According to Matthew. All four gospels tell some version of this story, each with subtle differences, but clearly Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. And, in all four gospels, this happens at the beginning of his ministry. Clearly there is something significant going on, something which heralds and forms the ministry of Jesus. Listen now to Matthew's story of the baptism of Jesus:

<sup>13</sup> 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, with whom I am well pleased."

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

### Sermon

Setting the stage for our reading, Matthew gives us John the Baptist out in the wilderness. John is the one crying out in the wilderness. John is proclaiming the eminent coming of God's kingdom, and the prophesied judgment that will entail. John is warning the people to repent and receive his baptism of water in the Jordan river. The narrator puts us at the river with John, when Jesus comes from Galilee.

When Jesus comes to the Jordan, to be baptized by John, to the crowd, Jesus would have appeared like any other repentant person coming to John. Matthew told us in chapter 3, that people were coming from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan to be baptized. The already

baptized and the procession of ones coming to be baptized would not have thought anything about Jesus coming from Galilee to be baptized. But, when Jesus approached John standing in the river, John recognized the one whom he said would be greater, the one whose sandal he was not fit to untie; John stopped and said, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John recognized who Jesus was, and would have prevented Jesus from being baptized. To anyone standing by, and anyone close enough to hear what John said, John's reaction to Jesus might have caught their attention. They would have wondered what was different about this candidate for baptism. And to us who read this story, John's reluctance to baptize Jesus tells us that Jesus was not the typical baptism candidate.

All the others who came to John, came repenting their sins; desiring to reorient their lives toward God's kingdom, but Jesus had nothing to repent. When Jesus entered into the water, he did not seek his own repentance. Instead, Jesus offers himself as the answer to John's call for all people to repent. Here we have an early indication that Jesus came to bring salvation and grace to the people of God. Jesus came not to repent his own sin, but to answer the call for all to repent. Jesus walked into the Jordan for all of God's children. This action of Jesus, represents an answer to John's broad call to the people, foreshadows his actions on the cross and in his resurrection.

In reply to John's question, Jesus says: "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Righteousness means simply doing what is right and, in this case, means doing the will of God. It is the will of God that John baptize Jesus, but it is also the will of God that Jesus be baptized. John and Jesus are both doing the will of God.

As Jesus walked out of the water the heavens are opened and the Spirit of God descends onto Jesus, and a voice from the heavens is heard. Most of us have heard this story many times, and may not think much about what happens, but for the people gathered around the river, and for the original audience of the gospel, this was a very big deal. The heaven opening and the voice from heaven is the kind of in breaking of God into the world, that was common in the Old Testament. The kind of event when God made covenant with the likes of Abraham, Noah, and Moses. Or when God appeared on the mountain top in Exodus, and thunder and lightning descended on the mounting. This kind of theophany had not been seen for centuries, and this happening now, as Jesus walked out of the river, was a sign that God was once again interacting with creation. This was an indication that the kingdom of God was entering the world. The kingdom of God, that John predicted, and

the kingdom of God that Jesus would later proclaim, was indeed coming into the world.

We see, in the baptism of Jesus, signs of what his ministry would entail. We see that Jesus has a substitutionary presence. That his coming into the world is meant as salvation for God's people. We see that Jesus, as did John, would live a life formed and in answer to God's will. And, we see that Jesus proclaims and institutes the coming of God's kingdom to the world. But, what does Jesus' baptism mean for us, two thousand years later? I think obviously it shows us the importance of baptism, of our baptism. As followers of Christ, we are called into a baptism like his.

Baptism is the sign and seal of our faith in God. Our faith is a gift from God, and our baptism is the visible means of that invisible grace. In his "Institutes of the Christian Religion," John Calvin teaches much about the sacrament of baptism. First, Calvin says, that God gives us baptism as a declaration that our sins have been forgiven. It is a common idea that baptism washes away our sins, but the reality is that our sin is forgiven by God through Christ. Baptism is the visible sign of the forgiveness that we have already received. The water does not wash away our sin, it only reminds us that we have already been forgiven.

A second meaning of baptism is that through our baptism, we participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Again, it is not that this happens in our baptism, but that our baptism is a reminder of the very real truth that in his death on the cross Christ died for us and put an end to our death in sin. Then through his resurrection, we receive new life in him.

Third, through our baptism we are grafted into the Body of Christ, and into the Church. If you know anything about grafting a plant, when a twig from one plant is attached to a living plant. The twig begins to grow and even thrive because it is grafted into the living plant. In the same way, through our baptism we are grafted to the body of Christ, and it is through Christ that we receive his life, and we are able to thrive in new life. In the same way we receive life and vitality from the Church of Jesus Christ.

Finally, our baptism serves as our confession of faith before others. Being baptized is a sign to the world of who we are and whose we are. It shows the world that we are followers of Jesus Christ, and that we belong to him and to his church.

Whether you were baptized as an adolescent or an adult, or as an infant, the baptism is the same. It is the same because the main actor in baptism is God.

It is God who forgives our sin and grants our faith. It is Christ who brings us salvation and makes us new. Because of this, we need only be baptized once. But each year, on Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we hear about the baptism of Jesus, and every time there is a baptism in church we are reminded of our own baptism and everything that it means. Even more, we are reminded of God's promises to the one being baptized and to us. At each baptism, we make promises, on behalf of the larger church, to nurture the faith that God gives to the baptized, to us, and to the church. And, we proclaim once again what we believe using one of the historical creeds of the church universal.

So, on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, let us remember with joy our own baptism, the promises that were made, and the truth of what it means to be called as children of God.

Let us pray:

Holy God, you called your Son into the Jordan to be baptized by John; not in repentance and forgiveness of his own sin, but in answer to your call to all of us. As we remember our own baptism today, fill us once again with the promise of salvation, and reunion with your Son. May we grow and thrive from the nurture of your Holy Spirit. May we respond with a conscience of contrition and subject to your will in our lives and in your church. Guide us to fulfill our promises to the church and to one another.

AMEN.