

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Courtney Veazey
Sunday, January 8, 2023

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, 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 it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God’s Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from the heavens said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Our Gospel reading this morning is simple. Five verses, two people...a river, a dove, and a voice from heaven.

The text’s power arises from this simplicity because it is this whispering simplicity that draws us near.

Released from excessive language, a powerfully quiet space appears – making room for our curiosity and reflection, our wonder and awe, our imagination and creativity.

The text’s quiet simplicity empowers us to better hear the crashing waves along Jordan’s shore, the fluttering of the dove’s wings, and the voice that hovers over the waters.

Clear and concise in writing about this event in Jesus’ life, the author of Matthew opens us to the shocking extraordinary found within the ordinary.

Jesus comes to John for baptism.

An ordinary action that immediately catches John off guard.

“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

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John knows who Jesus is. John knows that in Jesus the kingdom of heaven's power comes near.

In the verses immediately prior to Jesus' arrival at the water's edge, John says "the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I...I am not worthy to carry his sandals."

Jesus' emptying of heavenly power shocks John.

New things are being declared as the one who *will* baptize with the fiery Holy Spirit sets aside his heavenly identity to *be* baptized. The giver becomes the recipient. The ruler becomes the servant. God becomes human.

New things are being declared as the one who sits enthroned over the flood now enters that flood's mighty waters.

The God who created the heavens and spread out the earth...the God who gives us breath and spirit...the God who will descend into and break the powers of hell now descends into the waters of repentance and rebirth.

"Do you come to me?" John asks.

John's question to Jesus is the question of the incarnation, isn't it?

Like John, we know who Jesus is, and we know Jesus' heavenly power.

So, when the kingdom of heaven comes near, we, too, with eyes full of shocked wonder, ask our Savior – Do you come to us? Do you take on flesh and enter every aspect of our humanity? Do you really descend into the murky depths of our souls – the swirling of our confessions?

I wonder about those moments in our lives when we turn to Jesus and ask, "Do you come to me?"

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As we journey into this season after the Epiphany – the season of discerning how we respond to the dawning mystery of God’s manifestation – I invite us to thoughtfully consider...

Where is our River Jordan?

Where are those places in which God comes near and seeks full immersion into our lives?

Does the Holy Spirit’s alighting at our water’s edge catch us off guard? Can we sense when the extraordinary crashes into our ordinary?

Furthermore, can we embrace Jesus’ response to John’s question?

Jesus answers, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

It is indeed proper for us – for our community as the body of Christ – that the God of creation took on flesh.

As the boundaries between heaven and earth collide in the person of Jesus, God’s vision for restoration and reconciliation is fulfilled.

For it is Christ who faithfully brings forth justice to the nations. It is Christ who breathes life into dimly burning wicks. It is Christ who does not grow faint. It is Christ who opens eyes and brings out prisoners from the darkness.

It is Christ who models for us what it means to be fully human as we partake in the responsibilities of being the body of Christ here on earth.

The responsibilities of noticing the kingdom of heaven and humbly repenting...of making our way to the waters for baptism...of relinquishing our powerful egos as we enter those waters’ depths...of being raised to a new identity marked by the Holy Spirit.

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The responsibility of remembering our baptismal identity as we listen for the new things God declares and as we trust those declarations to sculpt us into a light to the nations.

The responsibility of fully surrendering ourselves to baptism's stormy power.

There is chaos in our surrendering to baptism. In following the way of Jesus and allowing the waters to continuously overtake us.

The artist Mark Rothko understood this disruptive, tempestuous nature of baptism.

An abstract painter best known for works exhibiting contained, guarded, square blocks of color, his style dramatically shifted when he painted the *Baptismal Scene* in 1945.

The Rev. Dr. Ann Laird Jones beautifully describes this painting in an article exploring how various works of art attend to the choreography – the intentional movement – of baptism.

She writes that Rothko's *Baptismal Scene* "twists and moves in lyrical movement and whimsical wonder. Here is not just the water splashing down from above, but continuing on in every direction, particularly under the surface. Here is efficacious grace...tumbling, moving, flowing...The watery depths seem to indicate endless activity."

From containment to lyrical movement...from guardedness to whimsical wonder...from blockage to endless flow.

New things are being declared.

After John consents to baptizing Jesus – after John consents to the kingdom of heaven coming to him, Jesus is baptized and comes up from the water.

An ordinary action immediately followed by an extraordinary revelation.

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Coming up from the water, Jesus receives a publicly proclaimed identity. The heavens open, God's Spirit descends, and a voice says, "This is my Son, the Beloved."

This descendant of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary is the Beloved.

This child born king of the Jews is the Beloved.

This migrant fleeing to Egypt for safety is the Beloved.

This man from Nazareth is the Beloved.

This is my Son. This is Emmanuel. This is God with us. This is God come to you.

The gospel's author writes the introduction to this epiphany without any embellishment – "And a voice from the heavens said..."

But this voice is no ordinary voice.

Thanks to the poetry of the Psalmist we hear this voice's stormy power.

We listen as this voice thunders over the mighty waters and breaks cedars.

We feel the heat of this voice as it flashes forth flames of fire.

We grasp for steadiness as this voice shakes the wilderness.

We seek hiding as this voice whirls oak trees and strips forests bare.

Jesus' arising is no ordinary movement.

Jesus comes up from the water to thundering, breaking, flashing, and shaking. Jesus emerges to the complete chaos that is present as God's Spirit sweeps over the dark depths and creates new life yet again.

Jesus steps onto the River's bank soaking with the truth of his identity as God's Son – as God's Beloved.

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A truth that prepares Jesus for entrance into a wilderness that will use every opportunity to instill doubt in this God-revealed identity.

A truth that prepares Jesus for the ministry of proclaiming, calling, teaching, and healing.

A God-revealed truth into which the waters of our baptism initiate us.

Initiated into the body of Christ through waters first entered by Jesus, our baptismal waters also prepare us for wilderness and for ministry.

Rippling over us until our baptism is made complete in death, our baptismal waters endlessly move under our surface and work their way through us – imagining us into new ways of being the body of Christ as they whirl us around in the dance with our triune God.

Forever tumbling, moving, and flowing, our baptismal waters never leave us the same.

Jesus comes to us.

May we consent to the kingdom of heaven coming near in our wilderness and our ministry, and may we embody the new things being declared.

Alleluia. Amen.