

JESUS' BAPTISM – AND OURS

Matthew 3: 13-17

SBCC January 9, 2005

Why do you suppose Jesus went to the Jordan that day - that day when John was baptizing a baptism of repentance? John questioned him; tried to stop him. John thought he was not worthy of baptizing Jesus. He thought Jesus should baptize him instead.

Jesus' answer has been a puzzle to scholars from early church days to the present day. Jesus said to John "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."

The baptism of Jesus appears in all four gospels, but this interchange between John and Jesus appears only in Matthew. Did Matthew think the baptism had to be done to fulfill scriptural prophecies? Unlikely because there are no scriptures that we know of that suggest that the Messiah had to be baptized. And yet Matthew seems to be saying that the baptism was God's will. The most likely answer to this question that I can find is that it stresses Jesus' solidarity with sinners. Jesus was identifying himself with the people who were coming to John for his baptism of repentance. As the one destined to be their Lord, Jesus accepts the sacrament of renewal of God's people.

But you know what? This is all academic speculation. What do you suppose Jesus, the 30 year old carpenter from Nazareth was thinking. The fact is we don't know what he was thinking and we don't know why he was there.

But he was there and he did what the others did. Let's use our imaginations for a bit.

The others were there to confess their sins, to make an outward and visible sign of their reliance on God. Jesus did that. Jesus began his public life with a strong, public affirmation that he, too was dependant on God's forgiveness, that God's forgiveness is what it's all about.

And then it happened!

Imagine what that must have been like.

You've been praying, you've humbled yourself, you've confessed your utter dependence on God. You've taken John's hand and you've waded into the Jordan. You've surrendered yourself to John's strong arms and gone beneath the dark water, as if in death. Now you are regaining your footing and your head breaks the surface. The water pours over your head and down your shoulders. You feel the warmth of the sun on your face and you look up. Suddenly you see the heavens break open and you see and you feel the spirit of God falling on you. You hear a voice from heaven saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Imagine what that must have been like!

Imagine hearing that you are God's child, the beloved!

Imagine hearing that God is pleased with you!

Imagine the feeling of elation, of euphoria.

*The Spirit of God is in me! I am God's Child, God's chosen!
 What shall I do with the courage I feel?
 What shall I do with the energy I feel?
 I have to spread the news! Where shall I begin?*

Imagine what that must have been like!

And it all began, the gospels tell us, with an outward and visible sign of total reliance on God. It all began with a public declaration of faith in God's forgiveness.

Imagine what that must have been like!

But every one of us who has been baptized has, in fact, had this experience. We may not remember it. Or, if we were older we may remember our baptisms, as Shelagh will, but have not understood all that was going on.

Do we remember the water pouring over our heads? Do we remember that rebirth?

Maybe we don't remember it, but we did it.

Do we remember the heavens opening? Do we remember the Spirit descending on us?

We may not remember it – we may not have seen it, but it happened.

Do we remember the voice speaking the words of generations of prophets, linking our lives with the chosen ones of Israel; linking our lives with Jesus Christ himself – with his life and death and resurrection.

Maybe we don't remember, maybe we weren't aware, but at our baptism, that voice named us, too:

You are my child, my beloved. I am well pleased with you."

That's what we did. That's what we are doing in our baptism: we're participating in the life of Jesus Christ. We're dying to the life of fear, the life of defensiveness, the life of militant individualism.

We're being reborn to the life of courage, the life of faithfulness, the life of confidence in the power of God. And this new life, this empowered life is founded first and foremost on the knowledge of God's forgiveness.

This is the knowledge, the reality, the assurance that offers us the strength, the courage, the faith to strive for justice, to be the hands and feet and voice of God in the world, to offer to others the healing word of God's forgiveness.

This is the good news that Jesus proclaimed.

This is the declaration of new life.

This is the foundation of Christian hope.
WE HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN.

We are each a beloved child of God, joined together with Christ to all other children of God. Remember your baptism – today, as we renew our baptismal vows. You will find them in your bulletin.

O God, My God

I bring myself once more to claim the gentle power of my baptism.

I open myself to the grace of your love, so that I might become what you would have me be. Amen.