

The Baptism of our Lord
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
08 January 2023

Matthew 3:13-17

I have been away for a couple of weeks and I think it is only proper to start this sermon with a joke that has absolutely nothing to do with baptism or the readings for today. "A drunk man who smelled like beer sat down on a subway next to an Episcopal vicar. The man's tie was stained, his face was plastered with red lipstick, and a half empty bottle of gin was sticking out of his torn coat pocket. He opened his newspaper and began reading. After a few minutes the man turned to the priest and asked, "Say, Father, what causes arthritis?" The priest replies, "My Son, it's caused by loose living, being with cheap and wicked women, too much alcohol, contempt for your fellow man, sleeping around with prostitutes and lack of a bath." The drunk muttered in response, "Well, what do you know?" and returned to his paper. The vicar, thinking about what he had said, nudged the man and apologized. "I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to come on so strong. How long have you had arthritis?" The drunk answered, "I don't have it, vicar. I was just reading here that the Archbishop of Canterbury does."

In our readings today we clearly see God's extravagance. This extravagance, this "going above and beyond or exceeding what is reasonable or appropriate" is seen in the first three chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. We hear three different voices announcing or giving testimony about Jesus of Nazareth. The first voice we hear is the voice of the Prophets: The angel tells Joseph that the child Mary is carrying is God's own son, "to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'— which means, 'God with us.'" Matthew then tells us about another voice announcing the coming of our Messiah: A voice of one crying, "prepare the way for the Lord." John the Baptizer announces, "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." (3:11). So, within three chapters we have heard two powerful testimonies about Jesus. Yet, Matthew is not done yet. In today's reading we see another testimony, and this one from God himself: A dove rests on Jesus after his baptism and a great voice breaks in: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." For those who have been in Bible studies with me, you know that if the same theme is repeated three times in rapid succession, the writer wants you to pay special attention because the message is an important one. Emphasis through repetition is an old Bible device that we see throughout Scripture. So, we must pay attention today.

Matthew tells us that Jesus chose to be baptized by John, an act that in itself was unnecessary. John knows that it is unnecessary and he protests, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" I say that this baptism is unnecessary because John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and Jesus was born

without sin and had committed no sin. Jesus, however, chose to proceed with the baptism, saying to John, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Another way to translate this phrase can be, "Let it be done this way for now. For in this way we shall do all that God requires." This is of utmost importance to Jesus. He wants to do the will of God in all he does. Baptism for him fulfills God's requirements.

But, what exactly did God require of his Son? In Hebrew, the expression "Righteousness of God" is a legal term used in covenantal relationships and treaties. When people do what God expects from them according to the covenant, they show human righteousness. When God accomplishes his part of the bargain, we speak of the Righteousness of God. So, Jesus chooses to be baptized in order to fulfill all righteousness, both divine and human. By accepting baptism he humbles himself to the status of human beings and acts on behalf of his people. On the other hand, as the Divine Word that existed before the creation of the world, by accepting baptism Jesus also fulfills the divine promise that the Messiah will be "God among us" and "God for us."

By accepting a baptism of repentance, Jesus is in fact telling John: "I need to embark on a rescue mission on behalf of all humanity. I am here to deliver God's righteousness. This is his part of the covenant agreement and I am here to fulfill the covenant." Through baptism Jesus is choosing to become God with us and for us. God has come down as he promised. God is fulfilling his righteousness. In allowing John to baptize him, Jesus is saying, "Baptize me that I may take the place of all the sinners of all generations. Let me accept this baptism of repentance on humanity's behalf, until the time comes when they will no longer need this baptism. Do it that I may go out and start my journey."

I just returned from my home country of Colombia, and while I was there, I was reacquainted with an ancient tradition. It is customary there for parents to bless young people as they embark on a particular journey. The young person bows his head and the elder places a hand on it and prays for God's protection. Parents know their children need this blessing as they begin a difficult journey. We see this same gesture in God after Jesus' baptism and humble acceptance of his mission. God commissions and blesses him for the mission ahead. As the skies open, a dove appears, and a deep voice says, "This is my Son, the beloved in whom I am well pleased." Jesus' baptism served as an act of commissioning for ministry. Having accepted this journey, Jesus chooses Baptism as his starting point.

My brothers and sisters, I believe it is the same with us. We too have been baptized. Through our baptism in Jesus Christ we too have been forgiven and restored. Through baptism we have been commissioned and made ready to "go," to start our own journey, to be on our way. We have a pattern to follow in the extravagant love and obedience of our Lord. We cannot pretend that this will be a pain-free or a conflict free journey. We too have to contend with shadows of the Cross at all steps of the journey. We too can expect suffering and anguish.

That Jesus' baptism ceremony points to the cross is validated by the other episode when the voice of God is heard with almost verbatim words: at the mount of Transfiguration, we see a Jesus who is filled with anxiety as he knew that the cross was approaching. He knows his death awaits him and yet he also knows he has no choice but to go to Jerusalem. Suddenly, the skies opened and a voice is heard, "This is my Son, my beloved one... Listen to him." This is a reassuring sign for us. Not only was God there at the commissioning of Christ's ministry, but he was also there at times when things were rough, when his heart was filled with dread, and when the journey was met with bumps on the road. At all difficult times, God showed up and comforted his Son, giving him the ability to endure and accept the shadows of the cross in his daily life, but also giving him the strength that he needed to continue the course set before him.

We know because of the faithfulness of our God that he too shows up in our lives. Every time we are discouraged and tempted to give up, God reminds us, "You too are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." Every time our heart is filled with sadness and loss, and we don't know how much more we can take, God, reminds us, "You are baptized and you too are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." Every time we are filled with nostalgia and feel that our best times are over and there is nothing left to look forward to, God reminds us, "You are baptized and you are commissioned for service. Your work is not yet done. Remember, you are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased".

Regardless of what our mission is, God continues to show up. God is always there for us. He will never leave us, nor will he ever forget us. Knowing this, I invite you to continue in your journey of faith. I invite you to fulfill the mission God has given each of you for your lives. God is with you and he will never abandon you. God has called us to share in the baptism of his Son, and he will continue to forgive us and commission us for the work ahead. Be faithful to your mission, however light or heavy that mission might be for you. God will give you the ability to see your presence among us at those moments when we need him the most.

Hold on to your faith in Jesus in 2023. Fall in love with him all over again and place your life into his loving care. Through Baptism, Jesus has become Emmanuel. The God who dwells among us. Reach out to him and he will bless your life and the life of your family. Amen!