

Remembering Baptism
Matthew 3:13-17
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Baptism of the Lord
January 13, 2007

Today we remember the baptism of Jesus and our own baptism. Presbyterians are known for doing things decently and in order, and so baptism in our tradition is generally a modest event. It usually happens in the church with the pastor sprinkling water from the font on the head of the one being baptized. Baptism in film and literature tends to be a far more dramatic affair. One of my favorite baptism scenes is in the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* which follows three escaped convicts in Depression-era Mississippi. As they travel through some woods, they come across the surreal sight of a group of people dressed in white, singing as they move through the woods towards the river. The convicts follow and find the people lining up to be baptized. Two of the convicts rush into the water to be baptized themselves. The first exclaims as he emerges from the water, “Well that's it, boys. I've been redeemed... The preacher says all my sins is warshed away, including that Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo.” One of his friends protests, “I thought you said you was innocent of those charges?” To which the newly baptized replies, “Well I was lynch. And the preacher says that that sin's been warshed away too. Neither God nor man's got nothin' on me now. C'mon in boys, the water is fine.”

This is how we often think of baptism – if not the setting, then at the least the purpose. We think of baptism as a ritual of repentance. In baptism we are forgiven, washed clean of the sin that has bound us, and welcomed into new life. There on the banks of the river Jordan, John the Baptist made clear that his baptism was about repentance. “Repent,” he preached, “for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” When he saw the religious leaders coming to him for baptism, he preached an even stronger message, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

John’s message raises a puzzling question. If John offered a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, then why was Jesus baptized? After all, if Jesus, as the Messiah, the Son God, was without sin himself, why would he need to be baptized? Many scholars feel it is a historical certainty that Jesus was baptized by John, for all of the gospels recount Jesus’ baptism in one way or another, and the early church would never have made up such a story. For them, the fact that Jesus was baptized by John was more of an embarrassment, something that needed to be explained and justified. To understand, we turn back to the text.

In his account of Jesus’ baptism by John, Matthew is clear about a couple of things. First, Matthew tells us that Jesus *intended* to be baptized. He went to the river just for that purpose. He didn’t happen to be there and get swept up by John’s fiery preaching and the excitement of the movement and in the sway of strong emotion head for the water. No, Jesus intended to be baptized before he ever got to the river, and according to Matthew, it’s his first action of the gospels. This is our first glimpse of the grown-up Jesus in the gospel, and the first thing he does is head for the water for baptism.

The other thing Matthew makes clear is that John didn't want to do it. John recognized Jesus as the one Israel had been waiting for, the one John himself had been preaching about. "I am not worthy to carry his sandals," John had said, and he certainly did not feel worthy to baptize him. "I should be baptized by you!" he protested. But Jesus was certain, and explained his reason for seeking baptism this way: "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Well, that seemed to clear things up for John, who dipped Jesus into the waters of the Jordan and baptized him. Then the heavens opened, a spirit like a dove descended, and a voice called out from heaven, "This is my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

But what was clear to Jesus and John might not be quite so clear for us. Jesus said his baptism was not about repentance, but about righteousness. What does that mean?

Righteousness, here, seems to have two meanings. First, it means the righteousness of God, that is, the way God works in the world to set things right. God's righteousness is the whole history of God's saving activity, activity that has often been associated with water. At creation the spirit of God hovered over the waters. In the time of Noah, God despaired at the wickedness of humanity and flooded the earth with water, and then made a covenant with the survivors marked by the sign of the rainbow. When Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, God parted the waters of the Red Sea so they might escape, and then provided water in the desert on their way to the Promised Land. The psalmist affirmed that God "leads me beside the still waters; he restores my soul." The prophet Amos promised that God's justice would roll down like water, and righteousness like a ever-flowing stream. Throughout Scripture, we read over and over again about God's righteousness – God's efforts to set things right in the world. And throughout Scripture, water serves as a tangible reminder of this righteousness, of God's power and saving activity.

On Thursday evening, I'll admit, I was having decidedly mixed feelings about water. I was on my way home from the Moveable Feast, my pastors' study group that meets each January. We'd gathered at the Presbyterian Seminary in Louisville, and on Thursday, the entire region was being hit by a storm system. Rain fell steadily all day, and was still coming down hard when I arrived at the airport. Our flight was delayed but not cancelled, and it was a bumpy, turbulent flight. As we descended into Birmingham, the rain slashed at the windows as the aircraft shuddered and shook. I practiced deep breathing and silent prayer. When we arrived on the ground, the rain was still coming down hard, and it was a white-knuckled drive back to Montevallo, listening to the tornado warnings on the radio in case I needed to make a detour.

And yet for all the stomach-churning turbulence and muscle-tensing tornado warnings, I couldn't really complain about the rain. Not in the midst of a drought. Last year we had the lowest rainfall in central Alabama since record keeping began. The drought, labeled "exceptional" for its intensity, is slowly becoming unexceptional, the new normal. The water use restrictions that many cities enforced over the summer may soon simply become a way of life. In the midst of a drought, it is hard to complain about the rain, no matter what temporary inconvenience it might cause. During a drought, we recognize water for what it is: a gift.

Like rain in the midst of a drought, the righteousness of God comes as a gift. We don't create it or earn it. God's righteousness, God's saving activity on our behalf, is given to us as a blessing.

Jesus' baptism was a sign of this righteousness. The heavens are torn open and God is made known as the voice of God reveals the true identity of Jesus, "This is my Son, the Beloved." The righteousness of that God, who will tear open the skies and act mightily to save humanity, is now being fulfilled in the life of Jesus. In the waters of Jesus' baptism, we are reminded of the righteousness of God that comes as gift.

But there is another meaning of righteousness that also seems to be at work at Jesus' baptism there on the Jordan. The righteousness to be fulfilled is not only the righteousness of God, but also human righteousness – the possibility that people can live in right relationship with God and others.

In the garden, rain comes as blessing – but it also means more work is about to come. The Bermuda grass which creeps into the vegetable beds will be back in force. The zucchini will grow six inches overnight. There will be vegetables to harvest and weeds to pluck, for with the rain, with the gift, comes the work.

So too righteousness is not just gift, but task. It is the holy work of living out the reign of God. In submitting to baptism by John, Jesus accepts that task as his own. This moment launches his ministry, when he will strive to live out that righteousness in his actions and teachings. In Jesus' life, we discover God's righteousness in human flesh. We find him calling tax collectors as disciples, dining with prostitutes, welcoming children. We hear him teaching "love your enemies, do good to those who curse you, seek first the kingdom of God." At his baptism Jesus embraces this task, this mission, that will bring him criticism, opposition, and eventually crucifixion. And he will hand over that task to those who follow him, charging them to proclaim and live out God's just and liberating kingdom. Humans are called as partners in God's righteousness.

I don't know about you, but I'm a lot more comfortable with the gift part of this story than the task part of it. It's reassuring to be reminded of God's righteousness, of the long history of God at work to save humanity. The task part is more challenging. How are we to partner with God in this plan of salvation? How are we to serve as co-laborers in the building up of the kingdom?

But there is assurance in this text. We do not do it alone. This is not some final exam where we are locked in a room with just a blue book and a ball point pen, forced to rely on our own memory and understanding. In fulfilling righteousness, in living out this task, Jesus had help, and so do we.

Our reading this morning reminds us that as Jesus came up out of the waters, the heavens opened and the Spirit like a dove descended. Jesus received the presence of the Holy Spirit to accompany him and strengthen him for the mission ahead. As he preached and taught, as he dined with outsiders and debated the religious authorities, as he broke bread and multiplied it for thousands, as he healed those who were sick... all along the way, in every moment of his ministry, he was accompanied by the Holy Spirit. He did not go alone.

After Jesus' baptism, Matthew tells us, Jesus went on to call his first disciples. In addition to the Holy Spirit, he had human companions who joined him on the journey. They shared in the task.

They laughed and shared jokes and stories and meals together. They helped carry one another's load.

Michael Lindvall writes:

The obvious point is that Jesus' need was twofold and cruciform. That is, you might say, his need was shaped like a cross. His need had a vertical arm and a horizontal arm. He goes to the River Jordan to find the vertical arm, the upright that connects him to the Father, the Spirit that strengthens him. [The gospel] poetically describes this vertical connection as a descending dove. God comes down, as it were, to be strengthening Presence. And then Jesus goes to Galilee for the horizontal vector, the cross member if you will, the human presence of those who will stand and walk beside him, at least most of the way, on the road before him.

[So it is for us in our baptism.] When you and I were baptized, we were assured of precisely the same cross-shaped strength for the journey before us in life. As water touched our skin that day, we were assured of the vertical, the presence of God with us. And then the minister turned us toward all the people present that day, our birth or adoptive family and our church family, and we were assured of the second thing all of us need, the horizontal beam of the cross.¹

Baptism is not just about repentance. It is also about righteousness. It is about the righteousness of God that comes as a gracious gift, and the righteousness of humans that is our holy task. As we remember our baptism this morning, we recount the mighty deeds of God, the gifts of the One who has acted in history to save us. We also re-commit ourselves to the task before us, the work of living out God's kingdom in this world. As I dip my hands in the water and make the sign of the cross, I invite you to remember that we do not face that task alone. The Spirit of God and the community of faith go with us. Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹ Michael Lindvall, "Can't Do It By Myself," The Brick Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, January 8, 2006.