

# “Jesus Is Baptized by John”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – January 8, 2023*

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Epiphany / Baptism of the Lord

Malachi 3:1-3

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Matthew 3:1-17

Nine years ago, this month – if math and memory serve correctly – during a trip to the Holy Land, our group traveled by bus to the particular point along the Jordan River believed to be where Jesus was baptized by John. While most of us chose to simply take off our shoes and roll up our pant-legs to wade in these waters, to fill up water bottles to bring home a souvenir, others in our group decided to rent baptismal garbs and be completely submerged.

The members of our tour group represented a variety of different Christian traditions – Presbyterians from this congregation as well as Rocky River, Methodists, Baptists, and likely more – and thus held a variety of understandings about baptism. Though we all knew this same story, which happens near the beginning of all four New Testament gospels, we interpret what it means for our lives, practices, and faiths differently.

Standing ankle-deep in the waters of the Jordan, we Presbyterians lightly sprinkled water on one another’s foreheads in remembrance of our own baptisms; most, if not all, of which had taken place decades ago as infants. Others took this rare opportunity to stand in the same river where Jesus once stood to be dunked completely under the waters by their own pastors, emerging as newly – or once again – baptized children of God.

Before Jesus waded into those waters – at that or some other point along the Jordan River – we are introduced to John. He is called the Baptist, or the Baptizer, because he uses water as a sign of ritual cleaning and repentance. He has come out to the wilderness – and attracted others to join him there – to participate in this long-established Jewish practice of water immersion.

These, of course, are not just any waters. The Jordan represented the entry point for the ancient people of Israel into the promised Holy Land after their long

Exodus journey through the wilderness. The Old Testament prophets referred to the waters of the Jordan as having special healing powers.<sup>1</sup>

And the message that the Baptizer proclaims is also deeply rooted in the tradition of the prophets. *Repent*, he says, *for the kingdom of heaven has come near*. (v. 2) Repentance is an internal shift, played out externally; it is a change of the heart and mind that leads to a new path, a different direction. It is a call to return to where you ought to be, to the way of life which you (individually and as a people) have been taught.

The word used here for “kingdom” is the same that the Romans used to describe their “empire.” Thus, John is establishing a contrast between two worlds, two realities. On the one hand, there is the empire, where colluding with those in power can be profitable and sometimes easier for survival. John refers to the religious leaders of the day as a “brood of vipers” for cozying up too closely with the empire and their failure to bear righteous fruit.

On the other hand, this act of being baptized represents the choosing of another way, a different kingdom. Instead of allegiance to the forces of violence and injustice, John is urging those coming to the waters to a change of heart and mind – an internal shift – that will lead to different external choices. John wants the religious people of his day – and especially the leaders of their faith – to *bear fruit worthy of repentance* (v. 8) instead of relying on the merits of their ancestors and merely showing up for ritual acts. John knew that in any religious tradition, ancient or modern, leaders may be prone to assume that nothing can, or should, change. But, within every church ecosystem, transformation is essential to health.

While under the reign of other empires at other times at its history, Judea is at this time occupied by the Romans. They have no national sovereignty; they must cooperate, to some extent, with the destructive and deceptive powers that be. To claim a separate kingdom – the transformation to an alternate realm – while under the reign of the Empire amounts to a message of sedition, an act of rebellion.<sup>2</sup>

Moving from injustice to justice, relocating from the empire of occupiers to the kingdom of heaven, will require a dramatic change of direction. In saying that *the axe is lying at the root of the trees*, John is adding a sense of prophetic urgency. Now is the time to wade in the waters, he is saying; this is the moment to choose which kingdom will receive ultimate allegiance.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Ochart, “Rules for Radicals”

Having proclaimed this message and baptized those who came out to the wilderness, John sees Jesus coming and – after wondering whether Jesus shouldn't be the one baptizing him – welcomes him into the Jordan. We're told that when Jesus emerges from the waters, *the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.* (v. 16) If we can imagine it, this is as if the dividing wall between the two realms – heaven and earth – melts away. In this mystical union, the direction, the values, the purposes of these two kingdoms unite and, for the remainder of his earthly walk, God's Spirit of truth and peace will rest upon Jesus.

At the meeting point of these two worlds – earthly and divine – a voice comes down from heaven saying, *This is my Son, the Beloved, which whom I am well pleased* (v. 17) We hear, with the love of a parent, how happy and proud of Jesus God is. And we understand – because this is what we also experience in remembrance of baptism – how knowing that we are truly, fully beloved by God can fill our cups to overflowing and nourish us along life's path.

To this day, we baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is the promise we are given that – even across the seemingly tall dividing wall of these two realms, earthly and heavenly – we have been grafted into God's family, adopted as beloved sons and daughters. Today, as we remember our own baptisms – even if they took at an age long before our brains can recall concrete memories – may we be reminded of how deep and unconditional God's love is for us. If a voice is telling you that you need to be wealthier, more ambitious, or more like some societal ideal, that is not God's voice. If someone you love is being told that they must deny whether they are a child of God, how they are called to serve, or who they love, it is coming from a different realm. For, no matter how we might stray from the path and require a change of heart and mind, no matter what difficult choices we may need to make, God is happy and proud of us. God wants to give us the strength to move forward. God wants us to discover peace of mind and heart. God desires that we both pursue and experience justice and grace.

And in Matthew's telling of the gospel, we will continue to see how vital this moment of transcendent understanding of God's love is for Jesus. Immediately after this baptism narrative, in chapter four, Jesus will be carried to the wilderness for his forty days of temptation – a story that we will read next week. And then, in chapter five – which we will read the following week – Jesus begins teaching the people through his Sermon on the Mount, beginning with Beatitudes: how even those who hunger and mourn, who are poor in spirit and persecuted for their beliefs are blessed by God.

Jesus, who – in the waters of baptism – was given a glimpse into the heavenly realm and claimed as beloved by God, will go on to reveal that neither tests nor temptations, heartaches nor challenges, not even threats of violence or loss of life mean that God loves us any less. No, in the kingdom of heaven – which John announced was coming near – God loves to the very end and from the very beginning. Even before we set our foot in the waters – or have it sprinkled over our heads – even before we take our first breath, God loves us, is proud of us, is pleased with us. *We love*, as we read in the First Letter of John, *because God first loved us*. (I John 4:19)

As Søren Kierkegaard wrote about the initiating work of God: “When we awake in the morning and turn our thoughts to you — you are the first, you have loved us first. Even if I arise at daybreak and instantly turn my thoughts to you in prayer, you are too quick for me; you have loved me first.”<sup>3</sup>

Remembering your baptism, you may or may not recall the moment you were sprinkled or dunked. But, please remember that baptism – which, in our tradition, is an outward sign of an inward action; a visible rite that celebrates what God has already done within us – reveals how completely we are loved by God; the God who created us each with energy, imagination, intelligence, and love; the God who willingly crossed over the barrier of one realm to another and reveals to us what grace and peace, true love and abundant life are really like. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> As quoted by Jeanine Brown from *WorkingPreacher.com*