

“The Water’s Fine”

January 8, 2023

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”



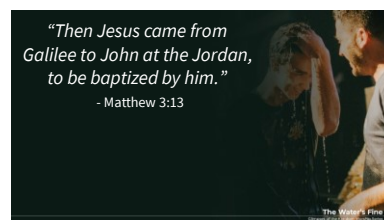
“Come on in, the water’s fine!” Have you ever heard that? Whether at a friend’s house, whether at the beach or lake, whether at Devil’s Bathtub up in the Hills, whether at a Polar Plunge fundraising event – it is an invitation most of us have heard. Perhaps you’ve even heard the invitation when at Hills Alive one July weekend. When I’ve heard this invitation to “come on in,” I usually hesitate. Some who came out to see John the Baptist heard the call and hesitated too. And yet a part of me wants to jump in, to take the plunge too. You see, a part of me does not want to be left out. My desire to be a part of what is happening often overrides my hesitation. I jump in or wade in.

In our passage for today, John the Baptist was standing in the waters of the Jordan River shouting, “Come on in, the water’s fine!” Some joined him and others stood on the shore. John had a word or two for those who stood on the shore, refusing to come into the water. He also gave a word of warning too about the one who would come to baptize – not with water but with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

We talked about the call to discipleship just last Sunday, as we heard the call to walk in covenant relationship with God and with one another in 2023. Today we witness how this played out in the meeting of these two people – John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. As we explore this encounter today and consider the implications that it has for our lives, let us begin with a word of prayer...

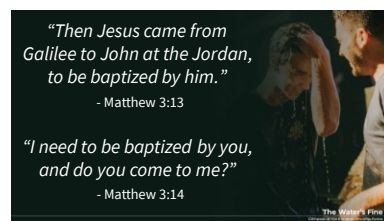
Turn with me to Matthew 3 as we begin this time together.

In the opening verse, verse 13, we read, *“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.”*



John is shocked that Jesus would climb down the bank and into the river. He says to

Jesus, in the next verse, *“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”* In this statement we can see that there

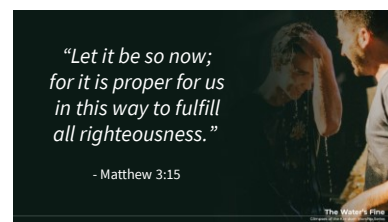


is maybe some familiarity with Jesus. But in Matthew’s gospel this is the first recorded encounter between John and Jesus. We learn in Luke’s gospel that Mary knew her cousin Elizabeth well enough to go and visit and to stay with Elizabeth for six months after Mary learned of her role in the coming virgin birth. Being relatives and being alive for almost 30 years, one would think John and Jesus would’ve crossed paths, that they knew each other. But we cannot assume that to be absolutely true.

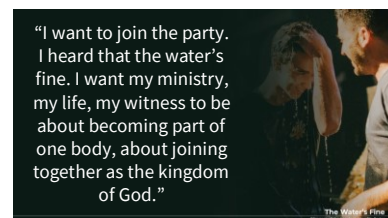
We can discern from Mark’s gospel that John at least knows of Jesus. After all, he is out in the wilderness calling people to repentance and baptism as preparation for the coming Messiah. We can maybe also assume that John has heard stories about Jesus. Whatever the case, we do know from Matthew’s gospel that John at first tried to prevent Jesus from being baptized.

Maybe it was a whisper from the Holy Spirit that alerted John to the fact that something was not right about this situation. Something set off John's radar about the scene that was unfolding there in the river. Or maybe it was something that John saw in Jesus' face or felt in the core of his being. Maybe it was the same thing that caused fishermen to leave their nets and that caused broken and hurting and lost people to reach out to Jesus. Whatever it was that caused John to protest, to know who was standing there before him, it led this wild man from the wilderness to want to fall to his knees and to be blessed by Jesus instead of attempting to confer this blessing of baptism upon Jesus. John's sense of what was right meant that Jesus should be the one baptizing, that Jesus should be the one offering the blessing.

Next, we turn to Jesus' response. He had to know the internal struggle that was going on inside of John. Yet Jesus says, *"Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."* In the next verse we see that John consents. But what do these words mean? Does Jesus just want to go through the motions that everyone else is going through? Does Jesus just want to jump into the water because everyone else is doing it? We talked last Sunday about the danger of just checking boxes, of just going through the motions, right? This sinless man certainly does not need to be baptized. What righteousness could Jesus possibly need to fulfill? He is the son of God come to dwell in the flesh.



What does make sense to me is that Jesus is saying, "I want to join the party. I heard that the water's fine. I want my ministry, my life, my witness to be about becoming part of one body, about joining together as the kingdom of God."



one body, about joining together as the kingdom of God.” It is also Jesus’ way of saying that faith is about both giving and receiving, about both welcoming and joining, about both teaching and learning. Faith is about community and unity and what we do together.

This is the root of our baptismal understanding in the Methodist tradition. As we celebrated earlier with Beck and family, baptism is about becoming part of the family of God, about covenanting to walk together in faith. As Jesus stepped into the river seeking baptism, this was very much what he was saying with his actions.

John hesitated partly because of his understanding of baptism. To John, baptism was part of an act of repentance that led to a forgiveness of sins. Jesus, the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, he had no need for repentance or baptism or forgiveness. So why would Jesus come seeking John’s baptism? Maybe Jesus was seeing a bigger picture too. John, probably like most of us, think of repentance as a turning away – away from our sins or our life of sin. We are sorry for what we have done or left undone, and we pledge to not engage in sinful behavior, or we promise to do better the next time the Spirit prompts us.

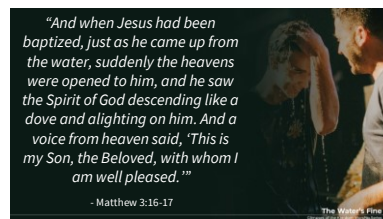
But what if, instead, Jesus saw repentance as primarily a turning towards? What if the gesture that Jesus was making by entering the waters of baptism was one of inclusion and acceptance and entrance? Again, this parallels our understanding of baptism. As a person comes or as a child is brought forward, it is a statement of inclusion. That person or family wants to be included in this body of faith.

It is a statement of acceptance as the congregation commits to walking with that person or family in faith, helping to raise them up in the faith. It is one of the entrance points into a life of faith. In our tradition we believe that the Holy Spirit becomes a part of the new life of faith that begins in the waters of baptism. It is part of the fire of baptism that Jesus brings as the Holy Spirit becomes a part of the baptized person's life.

By stepping into the waters and receiving baptism, it was also a signal for the start of Jesus' ministry. It was a sign that something new was about to begin. It was the moment that announced that the kingdom of God was breaking into the world. It was a sign that a new way of living in relationship with God and with one another was about to be revealed in and through the life of Jesus. And it was an invitation to follow, to become a part of the family of faith, to begin a new way of righteous living.

As we spoke about a few weeks ago, righteousness refers to being faithful in our relationships, both with God and one another. Last Sunday we were invited to commit to a covenant relationship built upon this same principle. There is a sense of community inherent in these ideas of righteous living and covenant faith. That aligns with part of why we think Jesus consented to baptism. We cannot be righteous all by ourselves. We are righteous with God and with one another. It is about relationship; it is about community.

In verses 16 and 17 we read, *"And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God*



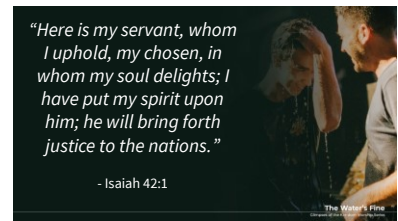
descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus. God speaks. There is relationship here in these words. There is connection and there is community between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Love undergirds this relationship between the Trinity. There is connection and relationship in our Methodist understanding of baptism. Love undergirds our understanding of baptism too.



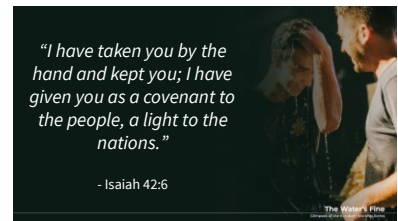
In the United Methodist way of baptism, a necessary requirement is community. Baptism is a corporate act. The community must be represented. As I said earlier, baptism is an entrance point into the community of faith, into the fellowship of believers. It is a joining up with the body. It is a commitment to walking together in faith. Once you have been baptized, you are never alone. Baptism is one of our ways of saying, “You are connected to us, you are a part of us. You are a part of this community, you are loved.” In the words of the baptismal covenant, we also invite the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to be a part of blessing this relationship and to enter into this fellowship.

Through baptism we are therefore joined to something larger than ourselves and to something larger than our nuclear family. Through baptism we are joined to something larger than our church too. We become part of the kingdom of God, part of the family that has a forever connection, an eternal relationship. To illustrate this forever connection and eternal relationship, we turn to the prophet Isaiah, chapter 42.

In Isaiah 42, verse 1, God introduces us to the better half of this relationship. Jesus is described this way: *“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”* We see this verse made real as God blesses Jesus as he emerges from the waters of baptism. The Spirit descended and God declared Jesus as the son, as the beloved, as the one in whom God was well pleased.

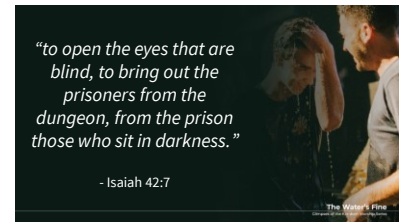


Moving on in our Old Testament reading for this week, God continues to speak of Jesus. In verses 6 God says, *“I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.”* Just as God leads us, so too did God lead Jesus. Just as God watches over you and me, God kept Jesus. And just as God did first to the Jews and later to the Gentiles, God gives Jesus to us as a covenant of his love, as a light to guide our walk. From the day that we enter into the family of God, from the day we are baptized into faith, we can claim these words and we begin to live into the promises that they speak. These words speak of connection and relationship too – and not just between us and God but also between each other.

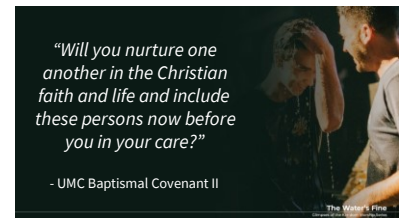


The next verse speaks of how this connection and relationship with God is intended to be lived out between one another. It speaks of our covenant commitment to this walk of faith in community and in the world, even when it is hard. Even though the water can get a little choppy, we commit to staying true to one another.

Verse 7 speaks of how Jesus lived it out and of how we are called to live it out: *“to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”* Our commitment to one another, our relationship with one another, our covenant with each other – they all call us to help one another to walk the path of faith when the other cannot see it for themselves. It calls us to lead one another out from temptation and sin, to free one another from the darkness that at times can overtake us. This world is challenging to our faith. We need one another to have any chance of living faithfully.



This echoes the pledge of baptism that we all made earlier with little Beck and his family, when we asked one another, *“Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include these persons now before you in your care?”* This is a question that we ask the community of faith every time we gather for a baptism. It emphasizes our connection to and our relationship with one another. It emphasizes our responsibility for one another. That’s an easy question to answer when life is good, when our faith is a top priority, when our relationships with God and with one another are strong. But the answer should not change when life creeps in and distracts us, when things go south, when pain and sorrow become our reality. Then, more than ever, it is important to remember our answer to this question.



Here was and always should be our response. Say it again with me: *“With God’s help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness... that they may grow in their service to others. We will pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life.”* In faith we covenant to live out these words with one another, not just during the baptism, not just on Sunday, but all the time.



Why? First, the small why. It’s right there in these words. We promise to live like Christ so that others can see what it looks to live like Christ. We promise to surround those less mature in the faith with a community grounded in love and forgiveness so that they can experience these things in order to help them grow into living as a disciple of Christ who offers love and forgiveness to the world. Second, the big why. This walk leads to life – to life everlasting and eternal.



That’s really why John stood in the wilderness, saying to one and all, “Come on in, the water’s fine!” John the Baptist knew that only through the Messiah could one enter into an eternal and personal relationship with God. So John called people to repent and to be baptized so that they were prepared to meet the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. That’s why we stand in the wilderness that we call the “world” proclaiming with our words and actions that the water’s still just fine, issuing the invitation to one and all to “come on in.”

Doing so we offer others a glimpse of the kin-dom of God – a glimpse into community and connection, into belonging and relationship, into living in the way that leads to life eternal. As we go forth, may we like John the Baptist, ever point others towards the one and only Son, to the beloved, to Jesus Christ. May it be so. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Living in covenant community is what we are called to do. How has doing so brought you to where you are in your faith today?
- 2) *Pray*. Surrounding one another, living as co-examples of Christ, we cover one another in prayer too. From church today, who can you pray for this week?
- 3) *Study*. Read Romans 12:1-8. How do these words speak to something larger than ourselves? How do they encourage us to live within a community of faith?