

A Matter of Identity
Matthew 3:13-17
First Presbyterian Church
January 12, 2020
Baptism of the Lord, Year A

The Baptism of Jesus

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

Sermon

During Advent we took a tour of homes - Gospel homes to be precise – and we asked how the coming of Jesus was celebrated in each of those homes – four different versions of the same Christmas story. It dawned on me this week that another way to think about this is that reading the four gospels is a bit like attending a “storytelling festival.” Because when we open up our Bibles it’s like one at a time Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, step out on the stage to tell us their stories of Jesus. All of them are stories about the same person, but all of them are unique... slightly different – and I know that can be a little confusing.

At some point you may have heard some preacher talk about this thing called the “lectionary.” The lectionary is three-year cycle of Bible readings that many churches use in the planning worship and preaching. Well, we just started Year A (the first year) in the three-year lectionary cycle - which is Matthew’s year. And from now until Advent 2020 we will spend more time in the Gospel of Matthew than any other Gospel. For that reason, I thought that today might be a good day to let Matthew step out on the stage all by himself and tell his version of the Jesus story... or at least the beginning of it.

Matthew begins his gospel in an interesting way – with the genealogy of Jesus. If you’ve ever been called upon to read it out loud you know how hard it is to pronounce some of those names. Now, I think Matthew starts his Gospel this way because he wants us to know that this is not a new story... it’s the continuation of a story God has been writing from the time God called Abraham and Sarah to leave home and travel to a far country based only on the promise that through them and their descendants the nations of the world would be blessed. I think Matthew believes that Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of that promise... and he wants us to believe that, too. So, he tells us there were: fourteen generations from Abraham to David, and fourteen generations from David to the time of the Exile, and fourteen generations from the Exile to Jesus, the Messiah.

Then, having sketched Jesus' family tree, Matthew tells us how the birth of the Messiah took place. But as we learned in December, it's a very different version of the Christmas story than we usually hear. According to Matthew, Joseph and Mary didn't travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem... because they already lived there. They're engaged, but not yet married when Mary reveals that she is pregnant. Joseph is about to break the engagement when an angel of the Lord tells him in a dream not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife Which he did — he married her but did not have relations with her until she gave birth to a son, and he named him Jesus. So, in Matthew version there's no stable, no angels, no shepherds – just a newlywed couple having a baby at home.

And then, after a year or two, Joseph and Mary receive a visit from some astrologers who had been guided by a very unique star as they traveled many, many miles from the east. Jesus would have been a toddler by then... did you know that? A beautiful olive-skinned, brown-eyed boy... most likely clinging to his mother's skirts and staring suspiciously at these strange men who showed up at their door. We don't know how many of them there were; there might have been three... there might have been twenty. But we do know that after learning from King Herod's advisors where this child-king was to be born, Herod enlisted them to come back and tell him where the child was... so that he, too, could pay him homage. Hmmmm. The magi find him... worship him... and offer him their gifts, they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod but to go home by another way – which they did. When Herod found he had been tricked - he was furious. So, he rounded up his troops and sent them to Bethlehem with orders to kill every baby boy under two years old. But before they could get to Jesus... that very night, Joseph was warned in a dream to get up and take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt... and that's what he did.

When Herod died, Joseph brought his family back home... back to Israel, where they settled down in Nazareth... and that's where Jesus grew up. That's where he played with his brothers and sisters... that's where he learned his Bible and his father's trade... and that's where he was when he got the news that John was preaching and baptizing in the wilderness. Which brings us to our text for today... a story some of us have heard so many times we are no longer surprised. Yet, that day when Jesus walked up to be baptized by John in the Jordan, John couldn't believe his eyes: "Why are you coming to me?" he said. "It is I who should be baptized by you!" But Jesus said, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." In other words, "This is how it's got to be right now. This is the right way for us to compete God's saving plan."¹ And so, John did it; he baptized Jesus. And just when he came up from the water, Jesus saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit descending like a dove, and he heard a voice from heaven saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."²

¹ Translation from N.T. Wright in *Matthew for Everyone*.

² This introduction follows Jim Somerville in his sermon "Identity Statement" provided on A Sermon for Every Sunday website.

Now, much ink has been spilled over the years trying to explain just why Jesus sought out John's baptism of repentance from sin. If he - the Son of God... the Beloved – was without sin... if he truly had no need (to be washed clean) no need for the sin-cleansing power of baptism, then why? Why do it? Well, among many possible reasons I think it's about showing... from the very beginning... that for the Son of God it's not about himself...it's not about his own will... but his Father's will. It's about the Beloved Son of God –with whom the Father is already well pleased – being completely obedient to his Father's will.

What God's will IS... what God's righteousness actually REQUIRES... will hopefully become clear to you in the year ahead. As we listen to Jesus teach and preach... as we learn what his priorities are and how he lives his life. Through the lens of Matthew's gospel, we will learn what God's will is. And I'll be honest with you from the start – Matthew sets high standards for those who follow Jesus... perhaps even more than the others, Matthew portrays the Lord as having very high expectations for us.

What we can say now at the beginning – as Jesus humbles himself and goes knee-deep in the Jordan like the rest of us sinners – is that following the Lord means seeking to be obedient as he was... it means trusting that the One who created us is the One who knows what is best for us... it means humbly listening for God's voice of guidance and direction... and sometimes it means putting aside our desires, our plans, our agendas. It means having faith that no matter how surprising it may be, God's path is always better... for us and the ones we love... and for the work of the Kingdom. There is an old gospel hymn that some of you know well. The words of "Trust and Obey" say what I'm trying to say this morning, only better.

When we walk with the Lord, in the light of His Word,
What a glory He sheds on our way!
While we do his good will, He abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and obey.
*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

But we never can prove the delights of his love,
Until all on the altar we lay;
For the favor he shows and the joy he bestows
Are for those who will trust and obey.
*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

I realize words like "obedience" and "submission" sound to us like fingernails on a blackboard. We don't like to be told what to do... We see it from the very beginning with Adam and Eve in the garden, we don't want restrictions. The thing is... when it comes to Jesus it is in obedience to him that we find true freedom. His way may be narrow but walking it with him leads to the right destination. Submitting ourselves to his will is actually liberating. Because this One we

willingly follow... this One we choose to submit to and try to obey... is the One who knows us best... and loves us most. "Obedience is not as burdensome as it seems at first blush," Richard Foster writes: When we obey our Lord, "we're doing nothing more than falling head over heels in love with the everlasting Lover of our souls."