

His Baptism and Yours
Matthew 3:1-2, 11-17
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Clinton G. Roberts
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

I had to laugh a little bit at the bulletin when I looked at it a little more closely today particularly at the Call to Worship from Psalm 46. It should have said that the nations are in chaos, the kingdoms tremble but it says that the waters are in chaos. But on further reflection, I think it's appropriate, having been to Forest Park yesterday morning where the waters are in chaos.

I went down there, 7:30 or 8:00 a.m. with Remy. We had just shaved all the dreadlocks off him so he had this silly, little fleece jacket on. I had everything I had on.....there was a horizontal wind at 40 knots steady, just howling. The lake was magnificent. It was absolutely chaotic, rollers – some of them pushing 16 feet coming in, angry and dark and then just breaking over the breakwater. It as powerful. It reminded me very clearly who's in charge around here and how little we really have.

It was a good illustration too of the week we've been through; the tumult of the nations, Iraq, Iran, missiles, planes coming down and trouble in the corridors of power in Washington. It's a metaphor, an illustration of the world that we live in but today we're being called to consider a different kind of power – dove power – the power of God, the power of the Holy Spirit that is released in our baptism through the baptism of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Our text for today from Matthew 3 is the beginning of Jesus ministry, his adult ministry on earth. It begins with his baptism and it concludes with the cross. Both his baptism and his cross are like bookends on the three years in between. And they both speak to the same truth - the truth that John the

Baptist first clearly perceived in the fourth Gospel when he sees Jesus walking toward him along the river bank of the Jordan River and he says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Jesus did that, not just on the cross for us, but he does it in his baptism – for us and with us. And that’s what we’re going to talk about a little bit today.

In Matthew’s Gospel, in chapter three, this is the only Gospel that gives us a dialogue between John the Baptist and Jesus in the moment of his baptism. This is the first time that we hear from Jesus himself in Matthew’s Gospel. It’s the first time we hear him speak and the context of it is like this: John has been practicing a ministry of baptism for repentance for people who are willing to turn around from the way they’re living their lives to embrace a life called by God; a life of righteousness which is simply doing God’s will, doing the right thing as God calls us to do the right thing. This was John’s ministry. It’s kind of the fulfillment of all the Old Testament points toward. It all comes down to John the Baptist, and there he is, like Elijah. He’s outside the margins of society, of church and state. He’s in the wilderness like the voice crying that we hear from Isaiah 40 and he’s saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

What’s amazing about his ministry is how many hundreds, indeed thousands of people came from society, from the places of power and privilege, to seek this kind of repentance from him. WE believe he ministered along the banks of the Jordan River roughly eighteen to twenty miles from Jerusalem itself. If you travel east from Jerusalem, over the Mount of Olives, you’d drop down to the lowest place on the planet – the Dead Sea. And a few miles north of the Dead Sea you would find John along the river. And that’s where he practiced this ministry.

His ministry was one of cleansing for sin. This ministry was typically reserved for Gentiles who sought to become part of the people of Israel, the children of Abraham. They had to be cleansed from their Gentile ungodliness. What's interesting about this passage is it's not just Gentiles that are coming, your run of the mill sinner. But we're told here in verse seven that the Pharisees and the Sadducees have shown up as well. Are they there simply to observe what this man is doing? Or are they there because they feel also the hunger and the need to repent for forgiveness.

When you think about Pharisees and Sadducees in the Bible, the Pharisees are the ones that saw themselves as kind of super religious, as filling God's word better than the average person could. As being set apart by that and by being moralistic and judgmental for those who were not. The Sadducees on the other hand are very close to the pillars of power in Palestine. They are in charge of the ritual sacrifice at the temple – you find them in attendance at the King's side. They're at the Sanhedrin and the Roman court as well. Both of these parties come down to the river, and John who could not mince words said, "You pack of snakes! Who told you to escape the wrath that is coming?" and he baptizes them.

What's interesting to me looking at this story 2000 years later – is who do we identify in this story as good Presbyterian folk who are in church on Sunday morning. Are we like the Pharisees? Are we like the Sadducees? Are we a mix of the two? We are clearly folks in the church. What John said to the Pharisees and the Sadducees is, "Don't think that just by being children of Abraham that you are good to go." God can make children of Abraham out of those rocks and I think about how we can be that way as Christians – I know I'm saved and accepted Jesus into my heart when I was seventeen and I'm good to go. What could go wrong? I'm going to heaven no matter what. Yes, but – we are

saved by grace through faith but it's not a slam dunk, and it doesn't mean that we can sin boldly and irrespectively of other people. That's not biblical. At the end of the sermon on the mound Jesus says "Many will say 'Lord Lord' and I will say I do not know you be apart from me you evil doers." Even Paul who we look to as the foundation and doctrine of salvation by faith and grace – even he says "work out that salvation with fear trembling."

Baptism is a beginning point but it's not completed until the day we meet Jesus who is both savior and judge – we need to walk that road with not complacency, but humility with fear and trembling because God is God and we are not. So here we find John with a ministry of repentance – which means turning around – for the forgiveness of sin and he prophesies one will come after him who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, and then comes Jesus. Jesus enters into John's ministry who validated to say yes to everything that John has been doing: Yes the law of God stands, yes this is what God wills for us and you can find it in the bible, but it's not enough. We fall short of the law of God and we cannot be pure and righteous apart from anything greater than ourselves. Ask anyone who's gone through a 12-step program and that's where it begins, right there. And it's not different for all of us with the way we embrace life. We need something more than the law to save us. And so enters Jesus the long awaited one and John recognizes him for who he is. He asked John "baptize me" and John says "It is I who needs to be baptized by you, Lord. Why are you asking me?" And Jesus responds with the first thing we hear from him from the Matthew's gospels, "Let it be so now for in this way we will fulfill all righteousness. Remember when I said righteousness is nothing more than doing the will of God? Let it be so John through this – my baptism – we will fulfill all.

So I have a question: Why does Jesus get baptized? Does he need to be baptized? No – he is the sinless one, the Holy One of God. He needs no repentance, he needs no cleaning from sin – so why is he submitting to the waters of baptism? And the answer seems clear: He’s doing it for our righteousness sake and to fulfill your righteousness apart from him which we cannot do. He is fulfilling it for all of us to be able to do the right thing, and the means for us doing that is he has come alongside us, and he’s done it with great humility. John says it is one coming after me to baptize you with Holy Spirit but Jesus doesn’t actually do any baptizing in this passage, nor do I believe he baptizes anyone in the New Testament. So imagine we’ve invited Billy Graham to come and preach to us one Sunday morning and it is packed – we’ve been waiting for him to come for weeks and here comes Billy walking down the aisle and instead of getting up into the pulpit to preach he kneels and says “Lord have mercy on me, a sinner.” And he begins the service on his knees. Well that’s what Jesus does in his ministry. He begins his ministry submitting in humility, Son of God, to the waters of baptism uniting himself with you and me and our sin and our brokenness. It’s amazing the humility of God. That’s how the gospel begins. Let it be so now for it is right for us to fulfill our righteousness.

Look what happens next. There are three things: Jesus after being baptized by John and the imagery of going under the water is the imagery of dying – it’s the imagery of death - he is immersed into the waters. And as he rises up from those waters three things happen: Number 1 the heavens are opened. Number 2 the Holy Spirit descends in the shape of a dove. Why not an eagle? Why not a tiger (that’d be awkward)? Eagles are raptors – they’re birds of prey who kill and have claws. Doves are gentle and doves are important in scripture. You remember Noah and the ark and the flood don’t you? What does the dove do but come with a promise of mercy after judgment and the renewal of the earth

and our reconciliation to God – that is all a part of the story of Noah and the flood – and the dove. And now the dove is back in the New Testament – the Holy Spirit – God descending on Jesus like a dove. And the third thing that happens is a voice from heaven says ‘this is my beloved son with whom I am very pleased.’ It seems to me that these three epiphanies – these three miracles – were not meant for Jesus alone. They’re meant for us. Jesus knew who he was. Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us. We just read about that in all the Christmas stories. Jesus needed no cleansing for forgiveness of sin and he certainly knew who he was as he began his ministry among us. No, these words were for us. This is my son my beloved, I am very pleased.

The gift of the Holy Spirit brings to the waters of John’s baptism the power of grace for us to be able to turn our life around and move toward the righteousness of God apart from the Holy Spirit. Who can do that? But now with Jesus’s own baptism he’s not only with us united but we are now given the means of grace to do what John was called to do in his ministry with the power to see it through.

And then finally the voice ‘this is my beloved son.’ When Jesus told his disciples to go out into the world and baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit after the resurrection – when we do that we ourselves in our own baptism are being joined with Jesus Christ himself in his baptism. Now his baptism and our baptism are part of one and the same story and that makes all the difference because now the words from heaven are for us as well. You are my beloved daughter, you are my beloved son – with you I am well pleased. Because of His baptism we know who we are now. We all belong to the same family – we are daughters and sons of God’s family. We are called by name. We are blessed by the Spirit – the gentle spirit of grace to live out our baptism. And yes will we sin tomorrow or this afternoon? Yes –

we will, but that's not the point. The point is knowing who is with us as we walk that road together. And it seems to me as we renew our baptism today that's worth remembering.

I want to leave you with two points that our friend Dale Bruner gives us in his commentary on this passage about the meaning of Jesus's baptism and ours. First is the ethical dimension. Baptism is tied to John's law of God – repentance. And when we remember our baptism and seek to renew it we need to remember that as disciples of Jesus Christ, we too are called to do the right thing. To seek God's righteousness – and not just in the big stuff but in the little daily stuff as well. The little acts of kindness and gentleness, the forgiveness that we are willing to offer, our prayers for our family and friends and our enemies as well. It's all laid out right here. We can read it from the Sermon on the Mount – that is the ethical dimension of our baptism.

The second is the sacramental dimension and that we would remember as we renew our baptism today that we are sealed in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit and therein lies our hope, our strength. So as you come up here in a few moments to renew the promises of your baptism think on those things. Think of what you are committing to ethically as a member of the body of Jesus Christ. And think about what you are promised sacramentally through the power of the Holy Spirit – the dove, gift of grace. Amen.