

Where the journey begins
Matthew 3:13 – 17
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
January 8, 2017

The Place of Baptism in a Christian's life:

I first visited Israel in 1971 or 72, traveling with my family and many friends from the church where I had been raised and confirmed: St. John's United Methodist Church in Hazlet, New Jersey. We were pilgrims. We wanted to see the biblical sites. We wanted to see the Jordan River. The tour bus pulled to the side of the road we disembarked. There was not a dock. There was no path. We took our shoes and socks off, sliding down the embankment and wading into the flowing water. Jesus had been baptized in the Jordan River and we wanted to experience it for ourselves. Our pastor, Rev. Riley, brought back from the trip a gallon jug of Jordan River water that he used for baptisms in the subsequent years.

In 1987 I was back in Israel, this time leading a tour group made up of Presbyterians from several different churches. In the fifteen years since my first visit, some enterprising folk had built a baptismal center, near where the Jordan River flows south out of the Sea of Galilee. Our tour bus pulled off road, onto a shaded parking lot. In addition to offering food, drinks and a gift shop, along the bank of the Jordan River were several defined spaces, with inclined cement walkways, where pilgrims could gather, wade in the river, offer prayers, sing, be baptized or offer renewal of baptismal vows. It was very convenient: the Israelis understand the value of tourist dollars.

However, this site, located in the north, near Galilee, while pleasant, was a modern touristic accommodation. The traditional site of Jesus' baptism is located much farther south, near where the Jordan River flows into the Dead Sea. It is located in what was, until very recently, an Israeli security zone. Practically this meant that those who wished to visit the traditional site of Jesus' baptism had to do so from the Jordan side of the river, not the Israeli side. As an aside, a little more than a week ago, Lois Ann and I met with our friends, the Ingraham's. Rusty works for the State department and has been stationed in Jordan. He and his family have visited the traditional site, from the Jordan side.

On our most recent trip to Israel, Lois Ann, Benjamin, Craig, Mimi and I were able to visit the traditional site of Jesus' baptism. The evidence that it had previously been a security zone previously was clear: we drove through an abandoned Jordanian military base in order to reach the biblical site. Like the baptismal site in the north, this one too has been developed. Our bus found easy parking. The center offered a gift shop, snack bar, and changing stations. You could even buy a loose fitting 'baptismal gown' to wear when immersed in the waters of the Jordan.

Baptism is one of the two marks of the Christian faith. Baptism is the entry point into the Christian faith. For an adult convert, baptism marks the change that has occurred in his or her coming to faith. For a child, baptism marks them as being members of the covenant community. They are children of the covenant and greatly blessed as a consequence.

In baptism, we follow the example and the instruction of Jesus. Today in the church is the Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Every year we remember Jesus' baptism. And, in remembering his baptism, we remember our own.

What do we learn of Jesus' baptism? First, Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his public ministry.

Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his public ministry

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.

Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The gospels tell very little of Jesus' life from his birth to his baptism. Jesus' family life, growing up in the household of Joseph and Mary, together with his younger brothers and sisters, is not a subject that is of interest to the gospel writers. These are private years. During this time, Jesus grows and matures; his parents raise him into honorable manhood. He fulfills his responsibilities as a son and as a brother. These years constitute a time that was personally but not publicly significant.

At the end of this time, at approximately age thirty, the priorities of Jesus of Nazareth's life change. He begins his public ministry, embarking upon the task of preaching and teaching, of declaring the coming of the kingdom of God. Note that the beginning of Jesus' ministry is marked by a decisive moment: a symbolically significant, irreversible, public act. He presents himself before his cousin, John the Baptist, for baptism. John the Baptist had wide impact upon the Jewish people. They came in droves to confess their sins and in repentance be baptized by him. However, Jesus' arrival at John's baptismal site provokes from John an objection. John demurs at Jesus' request. "I should be baptized by you," he tells him.

John the Baptist's objection was legitimate: so why was Jesus' baptized?

¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

The first thing to note regarding John's objection is its legitimacy. Those who submitted themselves to John's baptism did so confessing their sins and repenting, turning, from their corrupt and sinful ways. John's objection to Jesus' baptismal request is legitimate. Jesus is the only person to have ever lived who was not guilty of violating God's law. If John's baptism were a message of repentance, of what would Jesus repent? He is not guilty. So why be baptized?

John's objection is an example of something that has the right intent, but the wrong application. Granted, Jesus did not need to be baptized in the same sense

in which all others who heard John's preaching needed baptism. However, there were good reasons for Jesus' baptism.

Let us look at these reasons together.

Reason 1: Jesus baptism fulfills the law – he does what we could not do.

¹⁵ Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this **to fulfill all righteousness.**"

We are born into this world under the law of God. God is our creator, our sustainer and our Lord. We are born with a moral obligation to live and lead our lives in a manner that pleases him, that is in keeping with his moral character. We are both to refrain from sin and we are to do good.

One facet of the message of Jesus Christ is that he was truly God-incarnate. He is God-in-the-flesh. He is God born of Mary. He is not like the Greek god Zeus, dabbling and flirting with humanity. He is not like a Hindu avatar, a shadow projection of god into space and time. Jesus Christ is *born* into our world. He is born of a woman. He is born *under* the law. He is flesh and blood, born to a poor Jewish family, subject to the requirements of the Jewish faith.

For this reason, Jesus must fulfill the expectations of the law. Often we think of the law only in terms of prohibition – the 'thou shall not's' of the Ten Commandments. However, there are positive requirements of the Law as well: honor your mother and father, keep and observe the Sabbath. John the Baptist's call to 'repent and be baptized' was an obligation laid upon every Jew, an affirmative requirement. When Jesus presents himself for baptism, he is fulfilling, meeting this requirement, this facet of God's law. Jesus' baptism is a positive fulfillment of God's law. This is what the Lord Christ means when he speaks to John of "fulfilling all righteousness." In this, and in every other aspect of his life, Jesus Christ fulfills both the positive and negative aspects of the law completely and perfectly. He is the only person to have ever done so.

A second reason why Jesus is baptized is that in his baptism Jesus identifies with his people.

Reason 2: In his baptism, Jesus identifies with his people – he is not far off from those whom he loves.

¹⁵ Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."

Note that Jesus' first act of public ministry is one of humility. He does not assert himself. He submits himself to the law, to John, and to the requirements that have been laid upon his people.

We love to hear of stories of kings and princes who take on disguises in order to travel easily and authentically among their people. The idea of a king who '*becomes one of us*' can stir our soul and inspire our allegiance. However, becoming one with the common people is more easily said than done. In the

beginning of the Disney version of the story of *Aladdin*, the princess, Jasmine, sneaks out from her father's palace in order to walk among the common people of her city. Jasmine is ill suited for the mission: she does not know how to shop or to bargain, she carries no money, she is used to a life of ease in which her needs and wants are met by others. She can don a disguise, but she cannot traverse the distance. There is no point of authentic connection between her and the people of her father's kingdom.

Sometimes, if we want to emphasize a particular character trait of a man, we say that so and so is '*a man's man*.' We mean that this man epitomizes the ideal of manliness. He embodies everything it ought to be. Jesus is a Jew's Jew. Jesus enters our world and identifies fully and completely with his people. His advent is not a temporary disguise. He is *born* into a particular family, *raised* by a specific mom and dad. He fulfills his obligations as a young Jewish man. Beginning his public ministry, he first does what a good Jew ought to do: submitting to John's call to turn to God and be baptized. He identifies fully with his people.

In his baptism, Jesus fulfills the requirement of the law and he identifies with his people. Next, Jesus shows that he will be a substitute for his people.

Reason 3: Jesus baptism shows he is a substitute – he stands in our place

“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

The Texas comedian Ron White tells a story about his being arrested one evening in New York City. At one point in the telling of it he says, “*I had the right to remain silent; but not the ability.*” There is a difference between rights and ability, a difference between what we are willing to do and able to do. John the Baptist says to Jesus, “I need to be baptized by you.” John understands that in a fundamental way, Jesus can provide for him, what he, John, most needs. Jesus is baptized but Jesus does not, in any personal sense, *need* John's baptism. However, John, in a very personal sense, needs' Jesus' baptism. John understands that Jesus identifies with his people, and he is their substitute.

Late in the marvelous book **Ivanhoe** there is a scene where the Jewess, Rebekah, is about to be legally condemned. In her moment of need, she asks for a champion. She does not have the ability to defend herself. What is required of her is beyond her capacity. Her power, as well as that of her family, is not sufficient. She requires a champion, a substitute.

Jesus Christ did not need baptism. In presenting himself for baptism, in receiving a rite he did not need, he is underlining that he is a substitute, a stand-in, a champion. The one man who does not need to be baptized is baptized. He is the proxy. He identifies with the people. He will bear the punishment of their sin.

In his baptism, Jesus fulfills the law; he identifies with his people; Jesus reveals that he is the substitute. Fourthly, it is revealed that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the anointed one of God.

Reason 4: Jesus' baptism reveals him to be the Messiah – the one anointed by God to deal with human sin

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him.

The word '*Messiah*' means '*anointed one*.' The Messiah is anointed by God's Spirit. God's Spirit rests and dwells upon him. The Messiah rescues and redeems his people. The Messiah fulfills each of the three offices established by God for the leadership of his people: he is heir to the throne of David, the perfect king; he is greater than Moses, the last of the prophets, the perfect expression of God's word; and he is the great High Priest, making perfect the sacrificial system of the Temple. For us, on this side of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection, we see clearly that the Messiah is the one appointed by God to redeem God's people from sin and death.

The descent of the Spirit of God as a dove confirms Jesus' messianic office. In other words, Jesus' messianic role is not solely a matter of his own belief or conviction – important as that is. There is additional public outside testimony. This is important because it sets Jesus Christ apart in regards to the founding religious figures of our world. He is not a Mohammed, caught up in religious ecstasies in his cave. He is not Buddha, achieving enlightenment while meditating under a banyan tree. He is not Mary Baker Eddy, Joseph Smith, Sun Myung Moon, or Garner Ted Armstrong believing, constructing and marketing some new spin on old religious ideas. He is not a secular savior, like Stalin, Hitler, or Pol Pot, believing he can usher in the kingdom of God here and now by the sheer forces of will to power. Too many people in our world think they are appointed to be the next Messiah and much mischief has been made in our world by those who believe they have the authority and means to save humanity. In contrast, at his baptism, Jesus does not testify to himself. He does not have to do so. God the Spirit descends upon him. God the Father speaks from heaven. God anoints Jesus Christ at the beginning of his ministry and this sets him apart in comparison to every other religious figure, political leader, founder or philosopher.

Jesus fulfills the law, identifies with his people, identifies himself as a substitute and is anointed by God. Finally, Jesus' baptism reveals him to be the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God.

Reason 5: Jesus' baptism reveals him as the second person of the Trinity – the Son of God

¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

There are many places in scripture that hint at and suggest the Trinitarian nature of God. This passage is one that expresses that truth explicitly. God the Father declares his pleasure at the commencement of the ministry of God the Son and God the Son is anointed to his work by God the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of

his ministry, Jesus Christ is set apart, blessed, anointed and endorsed, visually and audibly, by God. There is no competition, disagreement, or division in the purposes of God. God's purposes find their perfect expression in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the perfection of God's plan and purpose. God the Father conceives of the plan of salvation. God the Son enters our world, achieves our salvation through his life, ministry, death and resurrection. God the Holy Spirit applies salvation to the hearts and minds of those whom God has called and elected. The knowledge of the calling of this ministry is confirmed inwardly, in Jesus Christ's own self-knowledge, visibly in the descent of the Spirit as a dove and audibly in the God the Father's voice from heaven.

Close

The story of Christ is a story of a journey, a pilgrimage. The story begins in earnest at our Lord's baptism. Baptism begins the story. It will continue as Christ's ministry unfolds, leading ultimately to his suffering and passion, his sacrifice for our sake. In the season of Lent we will follow the Lord in his walk, his journey.

Similarly, the Christian life is often portrayed as a pilgrimage. And, like the Lord Jesus, our walk of faith begins at baptism. Some are blessed to be born into believing families, baptized in infancy, growing up as covenant children, taught from childhood Christian doctrine and the teaching of the scriptures. For others, the knowledge of Christ comes later, with baptism marking public confession of faith in Christ as Lord. Either way, baptism is the beginning point of the Christian journey. Ours is not John's baptism, but Christ's baptism. We are baptized "in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

In baptism, we acknowledge that Jesus is the one who has done what we could not do: obey God's law completely and fully. Jesus fulfilled all that God expected. In addition, in baptism, in his name, we are identified with Jesus. There exists a gap, a chasm, between humanity and God. We are incapable of bridging that chasm: we cannot span the gap. Thankfully, it is not we who must reach out to God, not we who must build a tower to heaven, but God who has built a bridge for us to cross. Finally, Jesus Christ came to be our substitute. He takes our sin in order that we might receive his righteousness and so find favor before God the Father.

Where are you today in your spiritual walk? Have you called upon Jesus Christ to be your champion? Are you looking to him in faith? Do you trust in him (and not your own religious efforts or impulses)? Turn in faith to Christ. Ask him to be your savior. Look to him to free you from bondage to sin and death. Believe in him, the one who fulfills God's law, identifies with his people, is our substitute, is the anointed Messiah, and in whom God the Father is well pleased.

Say 'Amen' Somebody

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

¹⁵ Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”