

The Baptism of Jesus

^{NRS} **Luke 3:21** Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened,²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

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This morning I'd like for us to give some thought to preaching, or actually, to the broader issue of interpretation of scripture. I've said before that often I find myself preaching the sermon that I need to hear. Sometimes, if it seems like I'm stepping on your toes and bringing a hard message, it may be of some comfort to you to know that I'm stepping on my own toes, as well. This can easily happen because my task, my call, is to go to the scriptures each week and study, and then, on Sunday morning, report on what I've learned. If all I ever preached was what I already knew, I wouldn't be on a faith journey -- I'd be camped beside the road, going nowhere. Pretty soon, it'd be easy for me to feel rather self-righteous. It wouldn't be long before you'd know all that I knew - and we'd both think that we knew all there was to know -- and we could all be self-righteous together.

Sometimes there's a topic that needs to be explored. Other weeks, the sermon is about a scripture that's on the three-year list of preaching texts called the lectionary. On the calendar of the church year, this Sunday is the Baptism of the Lord Sunday. The gospel lesson that Virginia read a few minutes ago is really short. All it says is, "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened,²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" Well, that's rather short and straightforward. There doesn't seem to be a whole lot that one could say about those two verses that isn't self-evident.

One of the principles of biblical interpretation is to use scripture to interpret scripture. You can do this in several ways. You can look to see what's said about the same topic elsewhere in the Bible. You can look to see if the same event is written about somewhere else. And you can try to understand the context in which a text was written by examining the surrounding text. In the previous few verses the writer has been talking about John the Baptist, saying, ^{NRS} **Luke 3:18** "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.¹⁹ But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done,²⁰ added to them all by shutting up John in prison." In the twentieth verse it says that John was put in prison. In the twenty-first verse it says, "when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized," which could easily lead us to understand that John was put in prison, and then some people were baptized, including Jesus. So, who baptized Jesus? Apparently John the Baptist was in the hoosegow at the time. In the Gospel of John (1:26-34), John the Baptist says he baptized Jesus. That's also the case in Matthew (3:13-17) and Mark (1:9-11). So, while the surrounding text in Luke could suggest that John didn't baptize Jesus, the other three gospels say that he did. We're letting scripture interpret scripture. One of the important lessons to be learned here is that the gospel writers were not concerned about writing a complete biography of Jesus, told in chronological order. They were focused on telling good news, that's what the word gospel means. So Matthew and Luke tell about the birth of Jesus - and Mark and John don't even mention it. Mark and Luke tell about Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the temple toward the end of their gospels, but John tells about it as he begins to tell about Jesus' ministry in the second chapter of his gospel. The main focus of the gospels isn't biography and it isn't always chronological - it's theology - knowing something about God!

Reading these two short verses from Luke, we might get the impression that it's at the time of his baptism that Jesus learns that he is divine as well as human. For centuries we've confessed, we have proclaimed, that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. Well, how can that be? We want to dissect that concept, we want to take it apart and put it back together, over and over, until it's all completely clear and

understandable. We don't like mystery. We're uncomfortable with ambiguity. So, some have looked at this text and said, "Well, this must be when God told Jesus that he was divine as well as human. However, when we look back in the previous chapter of Luke, chapter two, we read the story about how Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem when he was twelve years old and his parents came back and were frantically searching for him. They finally found him in the temple, having deep discussions with the scholars. Jesus told his parents, "Didn't you realize that I must be in my Father's house?" That sounds pretty self-aware, doesn't it?

You might want to point out that in the text about his baptism, Jesus is told by a voice from heaven, "You are my Son." True enough, but in the following verses Luke gives the ancestry of Jesus and lists Adam as the son of God. We might also want to take note that the pronouncement from heaven contains language that we have heard before. Isaiah, writing about the suffering servant in chapter 42 says, ^{NRS} **Isaiah 42:1** 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. And Psalm 2, a song sung at the coronation of Israel's kings says, ^{NRS} **Psalm 2:7** I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you."

All I'm trying to point out here is that we don't know for sure when Jesus became aware that he was both human and divine. We have to live with ambiguity for now. If, when you get to heaven, the question is still bugging you, I'm sure that you'll be able to ask Jesus and clear the matter up. I suspect, though, that in the overwhelming glory of heaven and in the awestruck presence of God, you may completely forget about the issue. It's certainly fair to say that with the heavenly announcement and the Spirit of God coming to rest upon him, Jesus is commissioned and empowered for his ministry of service and for the forty days in the wilderness that follows his baptism. Jesus has been crowned with the Holy Spirit and sent forth to begin his ministry.

The baptism of Jesus has been the source of some embarrassment for Christians. Matthew and Mark give more detail about John the Baptist. He's this roughly dressed, rather wild-eyed prophet figure who's telling folks that they're a brood of vipers, a bunch of poisonous snakes. They need to repent, they need to change course in their lives, and be baptized for the remission of their sins. And then, here comes Jesus to be baptized. That does not compute! Sinless, pure Jesus, came to be baptized by someone who has been telling everybody to repent and be baptized to have their sins forgiven. It doesn't make sense. Matthew speaks to this. He tells how John protested and said, "It's you that should be baptizing me!" Jesus replied, "Do as I ask, so that I may fulfill all righteousness."

Okay, I understand why John obeys Jesus. John knows his place. John obeys. That makes sense. But I never have understood what Jesus meant about fulfilling "all righteousness." Why does Jesus come to be baptized? Perhaps we can better understand this if we look at how Luke talks about the baptism of Jesus. Luke says that all of the people had been baptized and Jesus as well. It sounds very much like Jesus was part of the crowd, one of many who were baptized - one of those who were in line, walking into the Jordan and wading up to John to be baptized. And we recall the words of the angel to Mary in Matthew, "He will be called Emmanuel. He will be called 'God is with us.'" In coming to the Jordan River, along with the tax collectors and all of the others that John called a bunch of poisonous snakes, Jesus was "God with them." And Jesus says that this is the righteous thing to do - to be with them in their brokenness, their failure, their sin. Later in Luke ^{NRS} **Luke 5:30** The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" ³¹ Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; ³² I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." Every time we turn around, we find Jesus being with the people who are in need. He was with Zacchaeus, the rich tax collector, who needed to change his life from greed to generosity. He was with the Samaritan woman at the well, who couldn't seem to make her relationships with men work. He was with the hungry, the poor, the angry, the sick, and the shunned - and it was the righteous thing to do. Jesus was all about being with us. "Go out and teach and develop disciples - and I'll be with you to the very end!"

Friends, when we come together to worship, it feels so good. Here we are, safely gathered together. The saints are here, singing, praying, taking communion, in fellowship with other believers.

That's important. But if this is all we do, we're believers, but we aren't followers. If all we do is assemble together and bask in the glory of the stained glass windows and the pipe organ - or if we gather and grumble about them - then we're just members of the club, not disciples of the Lord. If our righteousness is centered here, it's just self-righteousness.

But, we're called to be followers, to be disciples, to fulfill all righteousness. Like our Lord, we are to be out there with the ones who need the physician - folks who need help, folks who need to be healed medically, who need to be healed emotionally, and those whose very lifestyle needs to be healed. Jesus said, ^{NRS} **Matthew 11:29** Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." He said, "Watch what I do. Learn from my teaching and my actions. Step into the harness and pull the load I pull." We hear the phrases about the yoke is easy and the burden is light and we settle into a comfortable pew for a bit of comforting message and some pleasant music. In so doing, we misread the scripture. Jesus says that doing his work, fulfilling all righteousness, will provide rest for our souls. It will give meaning to our life. It will provide purpose for our very existence. It will make life worth living. Come here to worship and learn. Go out to work and serve - to fulfill your righteous calling. Amen.