

Why do you suppose Jesus was baptized? John baptized people with water for repentance. Did Jesus, the Son of God, need to repent? The church has been uncomfortable with the baptism of Jesus for centuries. You can sense that uneasiness even in the Gospel writers who each tell a slightly different version of the event.

John's Gospel gives us the testimony of John the Baptizer who saw the Spirit descending upon Jesus like a dove, but makes no mention of baptism at all. Luke's Gospel portrays the baptism complete with the descent of a dove-like Spirit and a voice from heaven who speaks to Jesus, but does not name John as the person who baptized Jesus. Mark's Gospel rather concisely includes John the Baptizer, the Spirit descending like a dove and the voice from heaven.

And Matthew's version is essentially the same as Mark's with the addition of some intriguing details. Only Matthew refers specifically to the Jordan river. Only Matthew implies that the voice from heaven may have been heard by someone other than Jesus, saying not "*You* are my Son, the Beloved..." but "*This* is my Son, the Beloved..."

There is one other detail that stands out in stark relief: only Matthew's version tells of John protesting the baptism and Jesus insisting that it be done, saying "...it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." This is Matthew's answer to the question: "Why was Jesus baptized?" This one little detail, peculiar to Matthew's Gospel, speaks volumes about Jesus, his ministry and crucifixion. The baptism of Jesus was unique, but it informs the pattern for our own unique baptisms.

The author of Matthew is always at pains to maintain a Jewish context for the life and ministry of Jesus. Matthew's Jesus reassures John that the baptism is proper and fitting for them to do because John's baptism puts Jesus in right relationship with the children of Israel. To "fulfill righteousness" has less to do with agreeing to a set of correct intellectual assertions and far more to do with fostering relationships.

Jesus was baptized because God found the ritual pleasing. God, so the rabbis say, chose the children of Israel to show the world how to be in right relationship with God. And so his baptism showed the people that Jesus was in right relationship with God. Jesus was baptized because the ritual also brought him into community with all sinners. His baptism put Jesus publicly in right relationship with all humanity. To be our Emmanuel – God really and truly *with* us.

Jesus' baptism, like his ministry, was unique in many ways. But there is a pattern in God's action through the sacrament of baptism that we share with our brother. Baptism, for Jesus, was an act of obedience that led to the inception of his mission and ministry in the assurance of God's presence. Loyalty to God and persistence in cultivating his relationship to God mark the life and death of Jesus. And because he was the Son of God, the perfect manifestation of the Second Person of the Trinity, we know that loyalty and persistence in cultivating relationships are the essence of God.

Each of us can also claim a unique baptism, and yet there are some commonalities. For one thing, baptism dissolves the delusion that we are separate from God. We are cleansed of the mistaken impression that somehow God is somewhere that we are not. Freed from the fear that we are somewhere that God is not.

Furthermore, baptism joins us to a community, just as John's baptizing Jesus helped the people recognize him as one of their own. Our baptisms are never the culminating point – never the ending of things, but a beginning. Our baptism is the launch of *our* ministry in life; the unique gift that each of us is to the world as an adopted child of God.

It's hard sometimes to trust and accept that we, like Jesus and through Jesus, have been made children of God in our baptisms. Some of us get over-invested in trying to live into our own image of our best selves. For others of us, the latent power of the gift within us frightens us into shrinking away from our potential. We live in a world that seems to be intent on making us doubt whose children we are – a world that seems to prefer that we stay focused on how far we fall short.

But do you recall what happened to Jesus immediately after his baptism? The text that follows our Gospel reading in Matthew says this: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Immediately after his baptism, the *Holy Spirit* drove Jesus into a wild place. More to the point, it was a wild place occupied by forces that knew exactly how to pressure Jesus to distort his awareness of who he was – forces that knew the most likely ways to successfully draw him into straining his relationship with God.

Do you know what happens to each of us after our baptisms? We join Jesus in a slightly different desert filled with forces that seek to discourage us from being who we were created to be – forces that know all the most likely ways to draw us into weakening our relationship with God. But not to test our loyalty to God. And not to challenge God's commitment to us. None of that is what the Spirit intends for us.

The same Spirit that drove Jesus into the desert drives us into a wild place, but, you see, it has been changed – subtly, profoundly and forever changed. The Spirit takes you and I into the world around us – the world where Jesus has already overcome the forces of temptation. What remains of those forces are mere shadows and ghosts.

The forces in this world that draw us away from God have only the power that you and I grant them.

In addition to what is *no longer* waiting for us in the wilderness, there is something far more awesome that *is* there waiting for us. The Spirit takes the newly baptized into the wilderness of this world that is inhabited by a communion of saints, living and dead. Baptism joins us to a community of the living members of the body of Christ who are heirs of God's eternal kingdom. Through our baptism, we no longer have to face the desert places alone. Baptism takes us into the wilderness together with others who are searching for and following God's yearning for them, for each other and for all creation.

Baptism is the entry into faith lived in community.

We renew our baptismal vows this morning as a reminder of who we are – a reminder of who God has claimed us to be. We renew our baptismal vows as a reminder of who those around us need for us to be. Recognizing that we are prone to be distracted by power-starved ghosts, we recommit – as individuals and as a community – we recommit to returning to Christ whenever we lose the plot, and start giving attention and love to ghosts that rightfully belongs to God.

In gratitude, we celebrate God's gifts in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, and the grace God gives in the Eucharist and in our prayers. We commit to share these gifts not only among ourselves, but on behalf of *all* who seek hope where they now grieve, who crave lightness where they now carry burdens, who thirst for new life where they feel surrounded by death and despair. "Nothing we do here," wrote Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor, "nothing we do here is a private matter between us and God. Like Jesus in the river, this is something we do in union – in communion – with all humankind."

We renew our baptismal vows as a reminder be present to others in the wilderness. To remind each other that this community is about living life as the light of the world for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. We are God's beloved children who seek and serve Christ in all people. God's beloved children who strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Jesus stood at the edge of the river willing to immerse himself in our humanness because it was pleasing to God; willing to be counted among the

wrong-doers and transgressors because it brought him into solidarity with the human community. And the voice from heaven that claimed him is the same voice that reminds us both *who* we are and *whose* we are.

Listen for it.

We are marked as God's own forever. Even in the deepest water, we are the beloved children with whom God is well pleased.

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Works consulted:

Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Home by Another Way*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999.