

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
Baptism of the Lord
January 12, 2020

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 42:1–9

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Matthew 3:1-6, 13–17

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now, John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

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

The Better Thing to Do

It really is winter now: We are in the month of January. I remember another winter when our young family lived in St. Paul, Minnesota during a fairly hard winter about 35 years ago. The wind continued to blow across the plain, and snow accumulated week to week. As they cleared the streets, snow piled up so high that the house was blocked off from the street, except for the driveway. January definitely was the coldest month: One day, the high temperature was zero degrees. It felt like a **wilderness experience**, certainly. But, the roads were clear, the businesses were open, and life continued. All the local folks were happy as could be, celebrating the cold weather. But, unlike the, my entire family was still trying to figure out how to stay warm in this somewhat extreme climate.

In our scripture lesson, **Jesus** has not yet entered the wilderness. He steps up suddenly in our scripture lesson as an adult and encounters **John the Baptist**, who is already well underway with this ministry. Unlike the *Gospel of Luke*, the writer *Matthew* does not tie the two men together in any way, except in their approach to **God’s revelation** and promoting fairly radical **change in religion** and everyday choices in living.

We also should note that our scripture lesson takes in the first events of Jesus as an adult. The only other story about these pre-ministry days of Jesus is the events described in the *Gospel of John* at the wedding in Cana (*John* 2:1-12). Interestingly, this encounter of Jesus with John the Baptist and his **baptism** is recorded in **all four Gospels**. So, we can see from these recorded events that baptism is a very important part of the Christian story, and it has remained a key portion of the **Christian faith** and its practice since the days of the early church.

Most authors believe that this portion of the *Gospel of Matthew* is based on the *Gospel of Mark* and that *Matthew* and *Luke* are **structured around Mark** and its story line of Jesus and his ministry. And, you may know that *Matthew* and *Luke* contain their own unique material, as well. With this background, we can appreciate the sudden shift as Jesus is suddenly before John at the **River Jordan**. John hesitates to **baptize Jesus**, because he recognizes that this person is without sin and must be the Messiah. And, John feels **inadequate** for the task, and tells Jesus and likely a lot of other people who are nearby. But, John the Baptist follows **God's will** and baptizes Jesus. This is a departure from his ministry: It is not the typical baptism for removal of sin, but the designation recognition of the **Son of God**. While still by the water of the Jordan River, a far more significant takes place: The **heavens part** and **God's Spirit** comes onto the scene. God is well pleased with his Son, **the Messiah**.

Now, Jesus begins his ministry in earnest. First, he endures a time alone in the wilderness. Then, with his face set toward Jerusalem he begins to preach and **heal** and teach. And, **the followers** come to him in a trickle at first, but then in waves. The remainder of the Gospel story will play out over months and years, ending in crucifixion, death, and his glorious **resurrection**. As our church calendar plays out, we will soon enter **Lent**: the time of preparation that leads to Holy Week. But, before then you and I have a lot of ground to cover and some theological and faith-testing **work to do** before then.

So, let's look at the **significance** of this event. **Baptism** is one of our **two sacraments**. It is a time of **repentance**, of dedication, of renewal, of rebirth in a fashion, of **spiritual communion** of our very being with the **Holy Spirit**, and a formal means of joining the **community of faith**. This last portion brings us fully into the **congregation**, but it also initiates us into the church **called by Christ** which existed long before us, extends far beyond our current location and circumstances, and continues **into the future** with God through the power of the **Risen Christ**.

When we commit ourselves to our **baptism**, whether as an adult, a teen, a child, or in **confirmation** of our parents' vows as an infant, we are **one with God** and the church. Something of this nature is going on during this the awkward moment for **John the Baptist**. He knows that this man before him, this **Jesus of Nazareth**, is without sin. John recognizes him as **the Messiah**, called by God. The presence of Jesus caused John to realize that there was **little that he could do** for Jesus, personally or **spiritually**. He realizes this and offers to change places with Jesus, in effect.

But, **Jesus** also knows the significance of this moment. He knows that this is something that he **must experience**. He is both **fully human** and **fully divine**. And, although he is without sin he comes alongside the common people and the rich and the sinful to undergo this **baptismal ritual** from John. It is **God's will**.

John knew that this was the **work of God** that he was performing. Otherwise, why would he have gone through with it? His insight was not of his own making. Indeed, everything told him not to do it. But, God's will was known and **God's work was done**.

That is **how God works** in our own lives, as well. This is especially evident in our **baptism**, and we recognize it and glorify it in our worship. But, more importantly for us as disciples of Christ as we go about our daily living **God is working in us** and through us. Like John's experience, suddenly we are called on to do something that is part of our routine when, suddenly, it becomes **extraordinary**. We may not have the opportunity to baptize the **King of Kings**, but we certainly can **pray** for the stranger, lend a helping hand to **those in need**, make the extra call to our friend or neighbor, **serve** in our community and in our congregation.

These actions show our intention to do good, often called "good works" in scripture. This is an expression of what we are capable of doing. It is an example of our "best self." And, we do these things because **Jesus Christ calls us** into action. In this way, you and I become his hands and his feet: serving as **the servant** for others.

In our scripture lesson, **John the Baptist** sees all of this. However, it is so great and overpowering he fails to state it: It's as if he was speechless. And yet, his action was **God's will**. Just as he hesitated, John realized that **the better thing to do** was to act on God's will, doing God's work, even if he did not fully understand it. And, the opening of the heavens and the **descent of God's Spirit** were the **confirmation** that God's will was done. John started out declining this task and did so with the best of intentions.

But, through the power of God he quickly learned that this was **the calling** of his ministry. Through John, **Jesus was baptized**. A **new ministry** was underway. God's Spirit was present, and God spoke words confirming the greatness of the event. Like John, despite our best intentions the very thing that **we want to do** often is not in keeping with what **God desires**. God could manipulate the situation, as if we were puppets controlled with unseen rods or strings. Instead, just as it happened to **John the Baptist**, God changes the **heart and mind** of the individual, so that the focus is not on ourselves, our position in life, our traditions, or even our own reputation. Instead, we are made a part of God's work and God's will.

Through **God's power**, you and I are **transformed** into effective **agents of change** with profound effects on our individual will and **our living**. And, the result of that is the will and work of God in this, **God's own kingdom**.