



The Feast of the Baptism of Jesus St. Thomas Vancouver, January 8, 2017 - Matthew 3:13-17

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.”

He takes us with him where he goes.
Where we go, we find him there.

Imagine this scene: John the Baptist is standing waist deep in the Jordan River. The river, a not very wide, not very turbulent, sometimes muddy body of moving water, is the site of important moments in Jewish religious history—Jacob crossing the Jordan into Haran, Joshua and his men crossing the Jordan into Jericho, Elijah parting the Jordan so that he and Elisha can arrive at the place where he will depart and give his power over to his successor. The Jordan—this important, not very wide, not very turbulent, sometimes muddy body of moving water, this is where John the Baptist is standing, standing and waiting.

But the Baptizer doesn't have to wait long. For, look, gathering on the riverbank are a crowd of peasant men and women. They have come to the Jordan and to John stirred by his preaching about repentance, the forgiveness of their sins and the coming of the longed-for Messiah. They are hoping to be baptized and, thereby, to make a fresh start in their lives.

And while we're imagining, imagine this: that you and I are with them—you and I, lugging all our regrets, our perplexities and our unresolved pain. You and I are there too, lined up with the others. We too have come to take the plunge, to be guided down into the water by the Baptizer and to come back up refreshed and rededicated to the best parts of ourselves and to the task of living a soulful human life with others on this planet. You and I are there too.

And so it goes, one at a time, young and old, men and women, you and I: each of us gets one last look into the face of the baptizer before being guided down, down into the not very wide, not very turbulent, sometimes muddy Jordan River, the river of new beginnings and new power.

But then as you and I and the others are walking shoreward, wet and happy and shocked at what we've done, there, walking past us toward the Baptizer is one whose eyes are peace and fiery loving kindness, one who, it seems, should have no need to repent or to let go of regret, no need, in fact, to be baptized as we have.

And so we watch, wondering what the Baptizer will do as he looks into the peace and the fiery loving kindness of those eyes, as he realizes what we have already understood—that this is the one from whom all renewal flows, this is the one who is the best part of who we are, the one who defines what it means to live a soulful human life with others. This is the one we have been waiting for.

We watch as the Baptizer hesitates for a moment, realizing what we have already understood. The Baptizer hesitates. And then, at the insistence of the one who stands before him, the Baptizer guides that one down into the waters of the Jordan and then back up again, the same way that he has with each of us.

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Where we go, we find him there.

The scene I've just described, of course, is an imaginative one—not exactly like the one Matthew describes this morning in our gospel for The Feast of the Baptism of our Lord. The scene is an imaginative one in which you and I are among the crowd of ordinary people with ordinary shortcomings and woes who, along with Jesus, engage in a ritual action of humility, hope and empowerment.

I tell you this story this morning because, for me, the point is this: the Holy One, did not withhold himself from anything that we ourselves have known, have suffered and have by the grace of God received. Not only did the Holy One, as the Christmas hymn goes, not abhor the Virgin's womb, he relished it, as we did: the warm and safe place of our beginnings. Not only did the Holy One not abstain from John's baptism, he embraced it, receiving the blessing of God and the empowerment of the Spirit just as we have. And finally, not only did the Holy One not protect himself from the Cross, he stretched out his arms upon it, offering himself and finding that offering to be the way of freedom and life, just as we have, just as we do in our ordinary and daily lives.

He takes us with him where he goes.

Where we go, we find him there.

And so this morning, on a morning of confirmations and baptisms and the renewal of Baptismal vows, know this: when we, the baptized, the confirmed, the soon-to-be baptized and the soon to be confirmed, when we find ourselves in the many rivers of our lives in the world: rivers that are turbulent and wide and forever muddy, when we find ourselves in those rivers, he is there with us, the Holy One is there with us: not like some kind of imaginary friend we had when we were young, but, there, in the remembered peace and fiery loving kindness of his life and in the very same energies within us that we can access and bring to any situation. He is there—the Holy One—the one standing silently beside us both in solidarity with us and as a witness to our lives. He is there.

And so while this Feast is called the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus, it is, in fact, the Feast of our own Baptisms, a Feast in which we celebrate God having claimed us, our empowerment by the Spirit and our being sent into the world as God's own peace and fiery loving kindness. It is the Feast of our own baptism because he has taken us with him and we, therefore, find him where we go.

And so today as many in our churches are being baptized, use your imagination. Imagine that you are once again being baptized, that you are once again going down into the waters of new birth and being plucked out of these waters into the loving and empowering arms of the household of God. Imagine that the vows you will repeat are being made for the first time and so are full of freshness and possibility and hope. Imagine these things, and it just may be that in the imagining, they will once again be so.