

A Little Detective Work with a Surprise Discovery

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Preached on the First Sunday after Epiphany—The Baptism of Christ, (10Jan), 2010.

Text: Luke 3:21-22

Now when all the people had been baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.”

Given the fact that John baptized for the forgiveness of sin, this event in the Jordan is a puzzler. We know from other parts of Scripture that Jesus was without sin,¹ so what was he doing there and why was he baptized if he needed no forgiveness? I have been thinking about this all week. I have discovered that if there is a verse of scripture that makes no immediate sense to me, by studying and praying about it, often I learn a deeper truth. So I puzzled about his all week without much progress. This is not quite a detective story, but we do have to follow some leads to get to the bottom of the mystery and a surprise discovery at the end.

All four of the Gospels report that Jesus was baptized by John, but only Matthew notes the seeming contradiction. In Matthew, “John would have prevented [Jesus], saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” Still the Baptist consented to baptize Jesus because he told him to and said it was necessary ‘to fulfill all righteousness.’² *All righteousness:* though to us this is a moral term, in the Bible it is a legal term, in the sense of *being made right with God*. But, again, we assume Jesus was right with God to start with, so what could that mean? Then I began to notice something else. All the Gospels also say that at the moment of his baptism, a voice from heaven was heard: “*This is my beloved Son.*” The Gospels all tell that following baptism, Jesus began his public ministry.³ The experience at the river was a significant occasion marking his coming into the open with his purpose and teachings. “*This is my beloved Son*” reminds us of similar comments in one of the servant songs in Isaiah⁴ and in the Psalms,⁵ both of which passages in Jesus’ time were associated with messianic expectations. I was getting closer but still not quite figuring it out until I asked one more question.

¹ Hebrews 4:15.

² Matthew 3:14-15.

³ That is, immediately following the temptation in the wilderness but clearly the baptism was a significant moment in Jesus’ vocation. Once it happened, his life took a new direction: he began to gather disciples, teach, perform miracles and move toward what was his life’s purpose.

⁴ Isaiah 42:1.

⁵ Psalm 2:7.

Mark and Matthew told about the voice from heaven a little differently than Luke. In those two accounts the heavens opened and the voice spoke about the beloved Son *the very moment* Jesus came up out of the water.⁶ This is when something clicked. I then asked why did John baptize people in the Jordan River? He could have done the same in the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem,⁷ a much closer location for residents of Jerusalem. They had to travel all through the Judean desert down to the Jordan near Jericho. Why there of all places? There was plenty of water near Mt. Zion. Why go all the way to the Jordan?

That is when I remembered Joshua.⁸ When he brought the children of Israel into the Promised Land, they had to cross the Jordan near Jericho. There was a miracle very similar to Moses' parting the sea as they left Egypt. Israel came through the Jordan River bed to claim the promise as God's chosen. John the Baptist 1500 years later believed things had gotten so misdirected in the faith that it was time to start all over, and his movement is essentially a renewal movement within Judaism. John's baptism was the sign of those who agreed with his renewal faction within First Century Judaism. Of course, John also spoke about the Messiah who would be part of the renewal. Many, many of Jesus' followers also came from John's group. When we read in the Gospels about John's preaching a baptism of repentance, we think it was a moral reform movement. But it was really a renewal movement within the ossified Judaism of his time. Jesus signaled in accepting John's baptism that he had the same goal as John, to renew Israel through a return to the Torah and the teachings of patriarchs and prophets. They had once been enslaved—they were again in John's and Jesus' time—and God brought them out to freedom. Moses renewed the covenant and rebuilt Judaism around the Torah. By rights there was no way they could get out of their bondage to the powerful Pharaoh. Certainly there was no way they could get such a large and unruly group back to Canaan. Following Joshua, however, they did get back and when they came through the Jordan, they were God's new people. Jesus' baptism in the Jordan signaled an equivalent renewal movement. In the same way they followed Joshua, now the people would follow Jesus into the Promised Land.

There are two reasons my discovery is important to you today. The first and obvious one is that the church is inexorably tied to Israel. We are not the successor to the promises to Abraham. We are part of the same movement of God. Isaiah had predicted:

In days to come Jacob shall take root,
Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots,

⁶ Mark 1:10, "And when [Jesus] came up out of the water, *immediately*..." Matthew 3:16, "And when Jesus was baptized, he went up *immediately* from the water, and behold, the heavens opened...."

⁷ John 9:7.

⁸ Joshua 3:14ff. Of course, Joshua's and Jesus' names both come from the same Hebrew root, "he saves."

And fill the whole world with fruit.⁹

The chosen people would grow beyond the Jewish people. Moreover:

Nations will come to the brightness of your light
And kings to the brightness of your rising....
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
And shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.¹⁰

The three kings from the East symbolize this promise in story of the birth of Jesus, but we represent it, too. Israel is not displaced from God's promise, but enlarged in scope through Jesus. So, remember, we Jews and Christians are in this together.

The second reason this is important to us is of great significance. History has come around again, and we are like the First Century people of Israel: *ossified*. We are so entangled with our old ways. We get confused thinking what is needed is a new moral campaign, to try to change people's behavior. Nothing wrong with that, but it is only a small piece of the Christian movement that John and Jesus started. If we really want renewal we must follow the One coming up from the Jordan. It is about receiving his grace and inheriting the promise. It is not about the works we should do, could do or ought to do. Goodness flows from God—not us—and when we get this upside down, we think it all depends on human effort. Do you remember my sermon before Christmas, the story about the little Muslim girl that the US Marines got out of Fallujah into Massachusetts General Hospital to save her life? When they came to the end of their rope, with every door closed, the chaplain asked the medical doctor, "*Have you tried praying about it?*" And then what happened? A miracle, that's what.

Our church is like an elderly person with rheumatism. All our joints are stiff and achy. We face huge problems: financial ones are obvious, but that is the least of it. If it depends on our efforts, we will keep confronting closed doors and eventually have to close these doors. If we depend on God, it will be another story. It will be good news. What must we do? *Have we tried praying about it?* When he came out of the waters of the Jordan the day of his baptism, the heavens opened and *some* heard a voice. What did the voice say? "*This is my beloved Son.*" Why would we not listen to God? Why would we not have the courage to follow that voice anywhere it calls us? Why do we not fill this room every Sunday to hear the teachings of prophets and apostles, to be part of the renewal in Christ? Do we have the strength to change the way we budget God's resources and structure committees and all the old ways we have done business so that we can be faithful to the beloved One? If this church has been so important, so

⁹ Isaiah 27:6.

¹⁰ Isaiah 60: 3-4, 6b.

life changing to us, will we not become again a missional church and reach out to bring others to the same saving word of grace?

Jesus baptism story is completely about our need for spiritual renewal, to follow the One out of the Jordan and enter his Promised Land. Today the Promised Land is not so much geography as it is a new relationship with the One who created us and working with that One to make our world more loving, just and forgiving. God give us grace and faith to claim the promise and glory again in the beloved One. God give us good leaders who will help us shed the systems that hold us back and lead us into new and better ways to proclaim and live the Gospel in our time. God, make us a praying people, a people who will seek God's will first. And when we hear, God give us courage to go where Jesus leads.

End

Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan.DOC