

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 13, 2019
Epiphany 1/Baptism of Jesus
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 89:20-29
Acts 10:34-38
Luke 3:15-22

The story of Jesus' baptism is a great example of how the different Gospel writers focus on different things as they write their Gospels. Here in Luke's account, there is no mention of John the Baptist, except for the fact that Herod has had him put in prison.

There is no mention of John's question to Jesus, where John says: "I need to be baptized by *you*, and yet you are coming to *me*?"

Luke doesn't have John asking the question here, but formulating a good answer to the question has always been tough for me. John's baptism was a baptism of *sinners*. John was dealing with people who needed a complete reconfiguration of their lives and their worldview.

Jesus, obviously, does not fit that paradigm. Jesus does not submit to John's baptism as a sinner in need of purification.

So, the question lingers: *Why then does Jesus come for baptism? What is going on?*

My answer to that question this morning is two-fold. Both answers require that we go back to the Old Testament to discover how what happens there anticipates the arrival of Jesus.

First, Jesus' coming to John for baptism is an *epiphany*. It is an occasion for God's divine presence to be shown forth. Specifically, it is an occasion to reveal exactly *who Jesus is*.

In his baptism, the heavenly voice says "You are my beloved Son." These words harken back to Psalm 2 and to other portions of the Old Testament, where the language is the language of the coronation of the King.

In addition, the voice says "With you I am fully pleased." These words harken back to Isaiah 42 (which we read today) and Isaiah 64. These are known as "servant songs," describing the ministry of the coming Messiah in terms of one who is the suffering Servant. In using these allusions to Isaiah and the other prophets, Luke and the other Gospel writers are saying that Jesus is the One anointed with the Spirit to make things right and just on earth.

Jesus' baptism, then, is an occasion for a divine manifestation, an *epiphany*, which proclaims him to be the Son of God. He is both the sovereign King and the Suffering Servant. He is the Liberator of captives, the Light to the nations.

But there is more. The people of that day were looking for the Messiah (Messiah means "One anointed by God") to usher in the "new age," the dramatic

coming of God's Kingdom in power. The Old Testament prophets had announced that certain signs would accompany this.

Isaiah and Ezekiel speak of it in terms of the splitting of the heavens (cf. Is. 64 and Ezekiel 1). Isaiah says: "O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at thy presence, as when fire kindles brushwood" (Is. 64:1-2).

Isaiah speaks on three other occasions of this in terms of the descent of the Spirit (cf. Is. 11:2; 42:1; 61:1-4). One such occasion is found in our Old Testament lesson this morning.

In using these Old Testament images, Luke is telling us that Jesus' baptism is ushering in the "new age," the special time anticipated in the Old Testament. It is literally an "earth shattering" event.

So, if we ask, *Why did Jesus submit to baptism?* One way of answering that is to say that Jesus' baptism was an "epiphany," a showing forth of his identity as the Messiah, the One anointed by God to usher in the new age of God's kingdom.

But I think there is another possible reason why Jesus came to John in the Jordan River. And once again, we must start in the Old Testament to see why.

In Deuteronomy 18, Moses tells the children of Israel: "The LORD your god will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren. Him you shall heed" (Deut. 18:15).

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is often portrayed as the fulfillment of Moses' words. This is especially the case for Matthew, who structures his entire Gospel in such a way as to portray Jesus as a "new" Moses. We see this clearly in Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*, which has Jesus going up a mountain (just like Moses did) to teach the people (even as Moses received the tablets from God).

Jesus' sermon is based on a series of contrasts between the law given to Moses, and Jesus' fulfillment of that law as the "new" Moses. For example, Jesus says:

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become sons of your Father who is in heaven (Mt. 5:43-45).

I thought again this week, and asked myself: If Jesus is a "new" Moses, what was it that Moses did? Moses led the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. On the way, their deliverance from Pharaoh and his army occurred as they passed through the waters of the Red Sea. Scholars almost unanimously agree that the waters of the Red Sea were a type or prefigurement of baptism.

So if Jesus is a "new" Moses, what did Jesus come to do? Like Moses, Jesus came to lead God's people on a "new" Exodus. The ultimate destination of this exodus, however, is not a piece of geographical land in Palestine. The ultimate destination of this exodus is the Promised Land of heaven. And the deliverance

that Jesus brings as the leader of this new exodus is not deliverance from Pharaoh and his army, but deliverance from the slavery and bondage of sin.

And the water that Jesus leads the people through -- water that is instrumental in their deliverance – is *the water of baptism*. That's what Jesus is doing as he steps down into the water of the Jordan River with John! He is humbling himself to pass through Jordan's waters in order to lead a "new" Exodus and to open up the Promised Land of heaven.

And here is perhaps the most amazing part. Under the first exodus led by Moses, the right to be called a child of God belonged only to the children of Israel. But under the "new" Exodus led by the "new" Moses, Jesus makes it possible for all peoples to hear (in baptism) the words that are pronounced over him at his baptism: *that we are beloved sons and daughters of God*.

Last week on Epiphany, the Magi from the East showed us that in Jesus all people have been made "co-heirs" to the blessings once promised only to Israel. This week, we are shown how we claim our inheritance. In the water of baptism, God claims us as His beloved sons and daughters. And that water becomes for us – as it did for the children of Israel – the passageway to healing and freedom and everlasting life.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, we come with gratitude in our hearts. We are grateful that in baptism Jesus was shown forth to be God's beloved

Son. And we are especially grateful that through this “new” Moses who has come to lead us on a “new” Exodus, all people can become His beloved children too – even you and me!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.