

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 15, 2017
First Sunday after the Epiphany
The Baptism of Our Lord
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 42:1-8
Psalm 89:20-29
Acts 10:34-38
Matthew 3:13-17

The story of Jesus' baptism appears in all three of the synoptic Gospels, but Matthew tells it a little differently than does Mark or Luke. In Matthew's account, all of the details are present, but with an added feature. As Matthew tells it, John the baptizer is puzzled and confused. All sorts of broken, wounded, sinful characters are coming from near and far to repent and to be baptized, and there, standing in the line, is Jesus!

It's a little much for John, so he objects. "I need to be baptized by *You*, and *You* are coming to me?"

Why, Jesus? Why, indeed.

John is perplexed, and the Church has shared his consternation for centuries. The Church has asked: *Why did Jesus need to be baptized?*

Was it because he was like others in that baptismal line and needed baptism to deal with a sin problem? Well, the testimony of Scripture and the tradition of the Church clearly show this not to be the case. Jesus was the Messiah, the eternal

Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. He was our great High Priest, who struggled in every way like we do, yet without sin.

Well then, maybe he was baptized as a way to *identify* with humanity in our sinful, broken condition. An act of solidarity of sorts. A way of being able to say, “Hey, I know what you’re going through; I know what you’re feeling; I know what it’s like -- let me help you and lead you home.”

Maybe the text itself answers the question. It says Jesus was baptized “to fulfill all righteousness.” But what exactly does that mean? Is Jesus doing this merely because the Father says so, without any rhyme or reason?

Why, Jesus....? This question has been on our lips for centuries. Why, Jesus, do you come to *us*, when we should be coming to *you*? Why would you choose to do this?

And Jesus simply says, “Permit it to be so; let go, and let it be.”

John’s question -- which is also our question -- is a valid one. As we try to make more sense of it, look with me at what happens. Matthew tells us that when Jesus comes out of the water, the heavens open and the Spirit of God descends on Jesus like a dove and lands on him.

Now I don’t know about you, but the image I have in my mind as I have always read this text is the image of a pure, lily-white dove gently coming down from the sky in a graceful, almost slow-motion kind of fashion. Sort of

majestically moving in a kind of sideways motion until it finally lands on Jesus.

Moving in a way that reminds me of the old gospel song my grandmother used to sing:

*On the wings of a snow white dove, God sends his pure, sweet love --
A sign from above -- on the wings of a dove...*

This is the image that's been in my mind for years when I read this text.

But I got to thinking about something (dangerous, I know!). I grew up in a rural Nebraska farm town, where my stepfather and brothers would often go pheasant hunting.

I remember a few times when we would be walking near a line of thick brush, looking for pheasant or quail. And lo and behold, we would encounter some doves. And guess what? These were not lily-white creatures majestically sauntering down in some kind of airborne waltz!

These doves would come out of nowhere, and they would SWOOP down on us with speed, force, and power. There was no sauntering. No floating. No drifting down.

When doves want to catch something, they don't *meander* down. They don't *glide* down. They don't *waltz* through the air. They ZOOM straight to the target.

Let me ask you something. When John asks Jesus, "Why?" and Jesus responds by saying, "Permit it to be so now," what kind of language is that?

This is the language of *surrender* and *acceptance*, is it not?

Could it be that when Jesus says, “Permit it to be so now,” that he is not so much *choosing* his baptism as he is *surrendering* to it? Jesus is surrendering to the fact that he is God’s beloved -- that he is the Spirit’s *prey*, that the Spirit has sought him out and targeted him with the awesome force of God’s love.

Now, perhaps our answer to the question “Why?” starts to come into clearer focus. Why, Jesus, do you come to us, when we should be coming to you?

And the answer comes back that **through no act or ability of our own, we are loved by God.** We are prone to run from God, to hide, to flee. But God is intent on loving us, seeking us, and pursuing us. We are God’s beloved. It is God’s nature to love us, to seek us out, to *target* us for Himself, to *hunt* for us.

So often we think of baptism as something that we *choose*. We either choose to receive the sacrament or we choose to have our children receive it. And whatever your theology may be at that point, most agree that the sacrament of baptism sets in motion a world of new relationships and realities.

But I don’t think Jesus *chose* baptism as much as he *surrendered* to it that day in the Jordan River. And I wonder: What if each of us viewed our baptisms not as something we *chose*, but something to which we *yielded* and surrendered? For to what are we yielding and surrendering?

To the awesome, inevitable force of God's LOVE. To the reality that long ago, long before we could speak at all, let alone speak God's Name, the Spirit of God targeted us. And at our baptism, the Spirit of God "swooped" down on us to gather us in and to empower us to take our place in God's promised reign of peace and justice.

As we come to the Table this morning, I invite you to yield yourselves, to surrender yourselves, to God's love. Permit yourselves to be God's *beloved* children. Let that love wash over you and fill you. Then let it overflow to those who are in need.

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