

January 9, 2022

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

Psalm 104

Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

On its surface, the question I am about to ask may sound a bit irreverent, but I think it is still a fair question, “Why do we pay so much attention to the baptism of Jesus?” After all, his was not a Christian baptism. It predates Christianity. Both Jesus and John the Baptist were Jews. The ritual that John performed in the desert was not one of Christian initiation. Rather, it was a Jewish rite of cleansing or purification, a rite that John performed on crowds of Jews, calling them to repent for their sins. Jesus is the Son of God. Why would he, of all people, need such a ritual? Nonetheless, Jesus went out into the desert from Galilee to encounter John and to be baptized by him in the Jordan River along with the crowds. And here we are today, concluding the Christmas season with a solemn celebration of The Baptism of the Lord. In addition, we are all being asked on this occasion to reflect on the meaning of our own Christian baptisms.

The four Gospels all treat the Baptism of Jesus differently. John does not mention it at all. Luke, in the reading we heard today, only briefly alludes to the baptism, saying simply and in past tense, “...Jesus also had been baptized and was praying.” Mark makes the explicit statement, “...Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” And in Matthew’s Gospel, John protests before he consents to baptize Jesus, saying to him, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But in the synoptic Gospels, all three evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, end Jesus’ baptism identically and dramatically, with the Holy Spirit descending upon him like a dove and with a voice from heaven saying, “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

So, why did Jesus, the Son of God, submit to the ritual of baptism by John? His own disciples and the early Christian community struggled with that question. Some early Christians were even embarrassed by the fact that Jesus began his ministry as a disciple of John, as if that belittled, in some way, the divinity of Jesus. But all four Gospels carefully portray John as the precursor of Jesus, not his teacher or his rival. John fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah that we heard in our first reading today, “A voice cries out in the desert; prepare the way of the Lord!” John preaches and baptizes so people can repent for their sins and be ready to encounter Jesus in his ministry. His spiritual cleansing goes far beyond a ritual act of washing with water. John demands that people live righteously and generously. When they ask him, “What should we do?” John tells them to share their goods with others in need and to avoid all forms of corruption. He calls on his community of tax collectors, soldiers, and ordinary people to be attentive to how they live and how they treat one another. Jesus’ decision to join that community and be baptized by John is life changing. Not counting the infancy narratives and the account of his time in the temple at the age of twelve, this is Jesus’ first appearance in the Gospel. Holy Scripture tells us very little about his early years, only that he “advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man.” We presume that he lived and grew with his family in Nazareth as an ordinary carpenter’s son, seeking to know and to do God’s will. Then one day, he joined the tax collectors, soldiers, and ordinary people following John out to the desert to repent and be baptized. On that day, and throughout his ministry, Jesus identified with the hopes and needs of these people rather than with the ambitions of self-righteous religious leaders who saw no need for repentance or conversion. In this first public act of his ministry, Jesus showed loyalty to his community, warts and all, as well as care for the needs of others. And for that, he was affirmed by the descent of the Holy Spirit and by a voice

from heaven saying, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

So, what does the baptism of Jesus have to do with your baptism and with mine? Jesus is our model. He calls us to follow him, and his baptism establishes a precedent for us. Like Jesus, we too were baptized into a community, a community of Christian believers. As diverse as we are, and with all our warts, we are a community connected to one another by our baptisms. We do not walk alone in this journey through life. We are not saved by ourselves. We are a community on a pilgrimage together – with one another and with Jesus. Jesus' baptism was a public proclamation of his commitment to his community, and so is ours. In addition to the renunciation of sin, our baptisms profess our commitment to mission and to one another. It is not just about being baptized. It is about living justly and selflessly for the sake of others.

After Jesus was baptized, the descent of the Holy Spirit and the voice from Heaven affirmed clearly that he was doing the will of God. Though we may not feel the Spirit or hear the voice in the same way Jesus did, we too are affirmed as we live out our baptismal call to mission and to serve one another. We are affirmed through our consciences. The Church has a teaching for that. It is called preeminence of conscience, and it is our highest moral authority. Through our consciences, we are in intimate relationships with God. So, as we live out our baptismal calls to mission and to serve one another, if we form our consciences properly, and if we follow our consciences, we can be assured that we, too, are doing the will of God.