

Baptism of our Lord 2017, Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17, January 8, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

In our biblical stories of Jesus' life we quickly move from the tiny baby wrapped in bands of cloth, heralded by angels, marveled at by shepherds, worshipped by foreign kings, fleeing into Egypt to escape Herod's terror, to the fully grown adult coming to the Jordan River to be baptized by his cousin John. Matthew the gospel writer doesn't give us any details of his formative years as a child or teenager. Here Jesus is most likely a young adult, around 30 years old, by the time he leaves his home in Galilee. In the narrative of Jesus' life his baptism marks the beginning of his public ministry. His entry into the water and his baptism, the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, the heavenly voice naming Jesus as "my Son, the Beloved" are just as much a start to the life of Jesus the Messiah as the stories of his birth in the gospel of Luke. The gospel writer Mark doesn't even speak of Jesus' birth, but begins his story of the Messiah with this event, his baptism. From scripture's point of view, Jesus' baptism is even more important than the Christmas stories, for his baptism is recorded in all four gospels, but his birth in only two.

But why is Jesus' baptism important and what might we learn from this event in the life of our Lord? Here Matthew's gospel is revealing. When Jesus comes to the Jordan to be baptized, John immediately objects. "I need to be baptized by you," he says, "and do you come to me?" Immediately preceding these words John said, "one who is more powerful than I is coming...I am not worthy to carry his sandals." Now, as Jesus stands there John realizes he is looking at the one he's been preaching about. John the Baptist wants folks to get ready for the coming of God's Messiah, the one who will "baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." He is out there in the wilderness, at the Jordan river, offering baptism for those who repent of their sinful and mis-directed lives, getting them ready to meet this new event by God, this one who is coming who will set things right, restore God's righteousness to a world grown hopelessly wrong. John sees Jesus and suddenly realizes this is the one who is coming, whose sandals he is not worthy to carry, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. And when John stands before Jesus, John realizes that he too needs to be baptized in order to be ready for the coming of the Messiah.

In a surprising twist Jesus doesn't allow John to be baptized. Jesus says, "Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus acknowledges John's ministry of baptism as a necessary preparation for the coming of God's messiah. It's all part of God's plan for revealing his act of restoring the right in a world that's gone all wrong. But there's more. By submitting to John's baptism Jesus stands in solidarity with this humanity so much in need of healing and restoration. Together they will become the instruments of God's plan of restoring a world turned away from God. Now God will make his turn toward the world, toward those who live in the darkness, despair and hopelessness and join with them by sending his Son. He will be baptized along with them, side by side, standing in solidarity with sinful people who await the revealing of God's messiah.

The baptism of Jesus is spoken of more frequently in scripture than any other event in his life, except for his death and resurrection. More often than his birth, more often than his miracles or healings, or parables. And while it is the cross and resurrection which identify Jesus as God's son, as the expected Messiah, and the way in which God's righteousness is revealed, it is in his baptism that some will have first seen Jesus as anointed by God and declared as his Son. Beginning with his baptism, Jesus' identity as the Son of God and Messiah will gradually unfold.

Some will come to faith and declare him Messiah. Others will reject him and declare him deranged or even worse, as demon-possessed. But for those with the eyes of faith we see him as the one upon whom God's Holy Spirit rests and who is declared "Beloved Son." In his baptism we see him standing with sinful humanity, joining a people who long for God's peace and righteousness in a world of sin and death and evil.

Baptism identifies Jesus as belonging to God, as being the Son of the Father upon whom the Holy Spirit rests. And that's exactly what our baptism does as well. When we are baptized God identifies us as belonging to the Father with his Son Jesus at our side and their Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives. Baptism becomes an unmistakable part of our biography, the story of our lives, as unmistakable as birth, your graduation from high school, even your death. We can't wipe it away, we can't say it didn't ever happen, or it didn't really ever matter.

The key, of course, is how to live our baptism into God as though it makes any difference in our daily lives. Here's where most of us, including even those who consider themselves committed Christians fail to understand the power of our baptism and its life changing ways. But that's what baptism accomplishes. It says you are a new person, you no longer need to fear what the rest of the world may hand out to you. You may live filled with deep and un-worldly love for others.

The world often encourages hate and revenge when we are wronged. But un-worldly love, love that flows from the love of God given to us when we are baptized, will often take us into unexpected places. Most of are familiar with the story of the Nickel Mines school shooting which took place here in Lancaster County ten years ago. Out of that emerged the remarkable story of how the Amish Community embraced in forgiveness and love the family of the man who shot and killed five young girls in an Amish school. Much of the rest of the world simply couldn't understand how members of the Amish community could reach out to Marie Roberts, the widow of the shooter, and Terri Roberts, the shooter's mother and assure them that they hold no ill will towards them or their family. Donald Kraybill, in his book Amish Grace, points out that many Americans, who identify themselves as Christian, couldn't understand how the Amish could forgive someone who committed such a horrible crime. But the Amish themselves, when asked if there is anything such as "Amish Forgiveness" simply respond with a puzzled look, "It's just standard Christian forgiveness, isn't it?" And from that point of view they simply try to put into action the forgiveness they believe Jesus teaches all of us.

This is where baptism into Jesus Christ leads us. To live like Jesus. To love like Jesus. To forgive like Jesus. It's an unworldly kind of love and an unworldly kind of life. But it's unworldly only because this world is passing away and the new world which Jesus brings is already breaking in. And you have been baptized into this new world to be the ones who show others the difference that being a child of God really makes. Amen.