Baptism of Jesus

Really…………You want me, John the Baptist, to baptize you, Jesus, right here in the River Jordan? It is you, Jesus, who should be baptizing me!

How could John have known Jesus was the one, the messiah? Let us reflect back a few years in their lives. Recall the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 1:39-56, Where Mary visits with Elizabeth, John the Baptist’s mother. Both women were great with child and when Mary greeted Elizabeth the child in her womb leaped for joy.

John and Jesus birth dates are fixed around the summer and winter solstice June 25th and December 25th.

We know john lived in the wilderness, wore clothes of animal hide and lived on locust and wild honey.

We also know Jesus did not conform to John’s expectations of what the “mightier one” should be. His rough, wild personality is not totally rooted in Christianity. In Matthew’s story he is a marginal figure parallel to Jesus yet subordinate to him. He is respected, taken very seriously, but does not become a disciple because he has his own group of disciples which appear to be the equivalent to Jesus’ group of disciples.

John represents a collaborator in the cause for the Kingdom of God although he does not belong to the Christian community. John preached repentance and baptized with water but the one who is to come will baptize with fire. John’s call to worship was not a cheery “good morning”, but a radical call to worship that would shake the cobwebs off the pews of St. Johns, Otter Lake; “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Matthew has toned down John’s expectation of the violent judge and reinterpreted Jesus as the Light of the World, a forgiving, accepting, non-retaliating, suffering servant king whose strength lies in his humbleness and meekness. Matthew has used this format to introduce us to the adult Jesus for the first time in his Gospel, and to commence his mission of salvation.

Matthew has presented Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed one, the true King of Israel. The character of his birth and the pattern of his early life help to reinforce his identity: he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and sojourned in Egypt. It is his baptism that finally proves his identity and purpose that had been previously implied.

By his baptism Jesus was formally promoted to the high office to which he had been called and prepared for by God. God’s Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove that alighted on him and the voice of God spoke the words of enthronement: “this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”. These words echo God’s promise to King David in 2 Samuel 7:12-14, “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his Kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.”

You are probably asking yourselves, why should Jesus be baptized? John the Baptist voiced his discomfort with the baptism; “I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?” John baptizes people as a sign of repentance in preparation for the Kingdom, but Jesus doesn’t need to repent; he symbolizes the Kingdom. To John, Jesus’ request seems just a little backward, as if Jesus was lowering himself and putting himself in place of his people. Jesus gives a straightforward response, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Righteousness signifies a right relationship with God, which Jesus already possessed.

So why did Jesus need to be baptized? Most kings and in particular this king, have claimed to have a special relationship with God. Their power comes from being God’s representative among the people. Kings have always relied on the Devine as the source of their authority. They exist as a mediator or as a go between, presenting God to the people and the people to God. Typically and tragically, throughout history, Kings have embraced their legitimacy with God but have failed miserably to live up to it. They have claimed a Devine endorsement but have not lived or represented the ways of God. Through his baptism Jesus presents himself to be the one true King who represents both God and Humanity. He has received Devine power and authority through the descent of the Holy Spirit and God’s declaration, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” He also exemplifies lost humanity by adopting the human responsibility to repent and return to God. His baptism therefore provides him with the shroud of Divinity and marks him as the true mediator between God and humanity.

While taking preaching classes a few years ago we were taught to find the pearl in the Gospel message and attempt to present the pearl and inject it into our sermon. The pearl in this text is baptism………….As Christian people we take our understanding of baptism from our Gospel reading today. We understand through God’s grace, we can stand beside Jesus and claim our Christian identity, the loved of God. Through this identity of grace we experience our own value and motivation to see and proclaim the “good news” to all people to be children whom God loves.

Of course, there are some difficulties with this. Frequently as we grow we sometimes forget that heavenly voice, and we start to listen to other voices. Perhaps we heard the voice when we were in school when a report card told us we were not quite smart enough. As teenagers we had peer pressure and those cruel voices told us we were not cool enough. As adults we hear voices that tell us we are not successful enough or we do not have enough money. Through the media and unkind people we hear voices that tell us we are not attractive enough. Through all these voices, God’s voice get drowned out and we begin to forget who we are. We begin to forget that God and a community of Christian people have claimed us as God’s beloved children…………..Sometimes we forget God has claimed all people as his beloved children. Do we sometimes forget this identity in others? Do we forget the voice when we meet homeless people, or when we perceive people as unattractive, or when we feel people are lazy, or dishonest, or cruel? Sometimes people just irritate us for no good reason, we just see them as annoying or trying. If we are not careful, we find God’s voice is being drowned out by our own judgments, and due to our words and actions, God’s love shines a little less bright in our world.

Repentance remains the central point of preaching the baptism of Jesus, because it marks the return to new life. The ministries of both John and Jesus mark the return in their call to new life and their anticipation of the reign of God and the Kingdom. Jesus own ministry will now begin with the call to repent. John can recognize the importance of God’s reign with Jesus’ approach to his baptism, even though he doesn’t fully understand his own role in the encounter.

In a few short moments we will renew our baptismal vows. Imagine yourself standing on Jordon’s shore with Jesus’ loving arms embracing you as the vows are recited. Breathe in the love as you concentrate on the words you are reciting. Exhale the love as you proclaim the “good news” to those brothers and sisters who are all God’s children.

As we walk through our days and hear others judge us, we must remember God’s voice at Jesus’ baptism. As we hear ourselves ridicule or criticize another, we must listen for his heavenly voice. As Jesus walked into the Jordan River, and we walk to the Baptismal font, as all of those who listened carefully then heard a voice from heaven, so all who listen carefully may now hear God say, “You are my son, my daughter, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Let us pray.

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.