

## ***THE BELOVED***

A sermon based on Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:11-17

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In keeping with his characteristic use of the Old Testament, Matthew finds in John the Baptist's garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist a link to the prophet Elijah (2 Kg 1:8), a figure who was expected to return before the Messiah (Mal 3:23) to re-establish the tribes of Israel (Sir 48:10). John's preaching is succinct and clear: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," words that Jesus himself will use later (1:2; 4:17). Matthew does not stress baptism as the primary object of John's preaching but repentance. In his book on the Gospel of Matthew John Meier writes: "Repentance is not an emotional and often fruitless remorse over the past. It is a determined turning away from a sinful past and full-hearted turning to God. 'Repent' means basically: change your heart and mind about what is important in life, and then change your life accordingly." [pp 22-25]

We find that all four gospels give the quotation from Isaiah 40:3 outlining John's mission to be "the voice of one crying in the desert" and urging the people to prepare the way of the Lord. This quotation appears at the beginning of the central section of Isaiah, and thus conjures up a whole string of biblical promises that will be fulfilled by Jesus. For example, it was prophesied that the anointed one of God will rescue the poor and oppressed [Is 41:17; 42:7], pour out the Spirit on the people [Is.44:3], and restore Israel to her former glory [Is. 43:5-7]. At the summit of this central section are the prophecies of the Suffering Servant which the Gospels all see fulfilled in Jesus, the one who was God's suffering servant to humankind.

In his commentary on Matthew, J.C. Fenton points out that, even though they were cousins, this may have been the first and only time that Jesus and John the Baptist met.

When Jesus came to John to be baptized by him in the Jordan, he fulfilled an event foreshadowed in the history of Israel in the Old Testament—"Israel came out of Egypt

to the Red Sea where, to quote Paul, 'our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; by the cloud and sea all of them were baptized into Moses'" [1 Cor. 10:1-2].

Matthew takes verses 13-17 from Mark's gospel and makes some changes. Two significant changes are: first, Mark writes, "*He [Jesus] saw the heavens opened*" Matthew changes to this: "*and behold, the heavens were opened;*" The second change is Mark's statement made by God, "*You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased*" which Matthew translates, "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*" Matthew makes the event more public than it had been in Mark—the voice of God speaks to the world in Matthew, but only to Jesus in Mark. [pp 58-60]

The conversation between John and Jesus is unique to Matthew. Perhaps it was added to Mark's version to answer questions such as, "Why was Jesus baptized?" or "Did his baptism imply his sinfulness?" Here are three possible answers.

First: Jesus was joining with John the Baptist to call the people to repentance as the first step in seeking forgiveness and redemption.

Second, at his baptism, Jesus announced to the world his own humanity and his identification with all humankind to share in their lives. He joined in mutual repentance with others through baptism as a sign of his complete faith in God's grace and compassion.

Third, Jesus asked John to baptize him as a way of consecrating himself and his mission to proclaim God's unconditional love.

Many people have a kind of superstition about baptism, that it is a kind of divine reward for being good. Most clergy have heard people say something like, "I want to be baptized and join the church as soon as I get my life in order." Of course, anyone waiting to get his or her life in order is not likely ever to be baptized. None of us will ever have our lives in order to be righteous enough to "deserve" or "earn" baptism. Whether we were baptized as infants or as adults, baptism is not something we earn by being righteous. Nor is it a sign that we have found all the answers. Nothing could be further from the truth. Baptism is a beginning. Even if we were baptized as infants, as we come to the point in our lives where we choose right from wrong, when we can claim our baptism, it represents the beginning of our journey as Christians. Recalling the three possible reasons why Jesus was baptized, we can apply them to our own lives. First, as we claim our baptism, we respond to Jesus' call for repentance as the first step that brings us into the presence of God our Creator who reaches out to us in love and compassion seeking to forgive and give us hope for new life. I have a story.

In the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., one will find an engraving of the Gettysburg Address and his Second Inaugural Address. There is a line in the Second Inaugural Address that speaks of love and compassion. That line is, "With malice toward none, with charity for all." Lincoln demonstrated this on the day that news arrived in Washington that the war was over. A crowd gathered at the White House and a military band was playing some festive music. Lincoln stood on the balcony of the White House and spoke. Instead of lashing out against the South, he spoke of the horrors of war. He spoke of families getting back together. He spoke of a time of peace. Then he said, "In a few moments I want the band to play and I'm going to tell them what I want them to play." Of course, the band started getting the Battle Hymn of the Republic" ready to play. This had been the theme song of the North throughout the Civil War. But Lincoln had something else on his mind. He said, "The band will now play the theme song of the people we have called our enemy. They are not our enemies any more! We are one people again. I want the band to play, "*Dixie*." Historians say there was a long, awkward pause. The band didn't have the music to "*Dixie*." Lincoln knew that the South was not only hurting because of the horrors of the war, but also because of the shame which accompanies defeat. Lincoln was sending a clear signal to the South. He was telling everyone that there would be no punishment upon the South. He was saying that the South would be treated with love

and compassion.

Baptism is our first step on the journey as a Christian and is a sign of our being forgiven by a loving and compassionate God.

Second, as we claim our baptism, we celebrate Jesus' humanity and his identification with all humankind to share in our lives. We join in mutual repentance with others through baptism as a sign of our complete faith in God's grace and compassion.

It is the desire to see the world differently, to see each other differently, and even to see ourselves differently. Baptism is a fresh start, not a destination. Baptism calls us to review our lives and consider how we move in a new direction.

Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Through Jesus, baptism calls into question my previous life as I rely on God's grace and compassion to show me the way to become the person God calls me to be.

Third, Jesus asked John to baptize him as a way of consecrating himself and his mission to proclaim God's unconditional love.

Jesus' baptism serves as a model for our baptism. While some questions about his mission and destiny may have been answered when he was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, Jesus continued to deal with questions and temptations throughout his life. Baptism is not a trial-free membership, but a rite of initiation into a way of life in which Jesus promised there would be trials but that we would not have to endure those trials alone.

Baptism prepares us for a journey of faith, much like Jesus' journey, as our life continues to unfold long after our baptism as we try to discern what our baptism means in our daily living. In short, through baptism, you become a new person in Christ and your life is consecrated to service in the name of Jesus Christ.

A question arose recently in our Confirmation class. "When did God stop speaking to us like He spoke to the prophets and to Jesus?"

No doubt, psychiatrist Albert Ellis was expressing what most people think today when he said, "If you talk to God, that's prayer; if God talks to you, that's schizophrenia."

But the confirmands were asking a serious question and a serious answer was required. I told them that God still speaks to us. It may not be in words but God speaks to us in our life experiences, in the people of our lives, in the world around us. God speaks to us every day in more ways than we can number, more often than we can imagine. It's a matter of how we listen. I have a story.

Back when the telegraph was the fastest means of long-distance communication, there was a story about a young man who applied for a job as a Morse code operator. Answering an ad in the newspaper, he went to the address that was listed. When he arrived, he entered a large, noisy office. In the background a telegraph clacked away. A sign on the receptionist's counter instructed job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned to enter the inner office.

The young man completed his form and sat down with seven other waiting applicants. After a few minutes, the young man stood up, crossed the room to the door of the inner office, and walked right in. Naturally the other applicants perked up, wondering what was going on. Why had this man been so bold? They muttered among themselves that they hadn't heard any summons yet. They took more than a little satisfaction in assuming the young man who went into the office would be reprimanded for his presumption and summarily disqualified for the job.

Within a few minutes the young man emerged from the inner office escorted by the interviewer, who announced to the other applicants, "Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming, but the job has been filled by this young man."

The other applicants began grumbling to each other, and then one spoke up, "Wait a minute--I don't understand. He was the last one to come in, and we never even got a chance to be interviewed. Yet he got the job. That's not fair."

The employer responded, "While you have sat there the telegraph has been ticking out the following message: "If you understand this message, then come right in. The job is yours."

*If we are listening, we can hear God speaking to us: “You are my child, whom I love. I forgive you. I redeem you. And I consecrate you as my servant in the name of Jesus, my Anointed One.”*

And let the people say, “Amen.”