

The Baptism of Jesus: Claiming His Flock

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, January 13, 2008.

John the Baptist sets up shop at the Jordan River near Jerusalem and before too long, he has a thriving ministry. John draws crowds when he issues a call for the people to be baptized in the water of the River Jordan, the river which would cleanse them from sin. His baptism is a baptism of repentance. Then one day Jesus comes along. Jesus, the most righteous person John knows, Mr. “God is My Father,” who is obviously in no need of repentance, comes all the way from Galilee and ends up at the river in front of John. Jesus asks John to be baptized along with all those folks John keeps referring to as a “brood of vipers,” and John is clearly baffled. Why? Why, in heaven’s name, would Jesus walk down that grassy bank and wade out into the water, with John trailing along behind, arguing about whether or not this is going to help bring forth the Messiah? Sinners-being-cleansed is what is supposed to prepare the people for the Messianic age. Righteous-people-getting-sinners’-dirty-water-on-them – that is not part of the plan. But despite John’s protest, the carpenter’s son goes down into the waters and when he comes out and the cosmos cracks open at the voice of God, he is clearly God’s son.

John the Baptist was perhaps over-focused on repentance—couldn’t really think outside that box—so he could not understand why Jesus would want to be baptized. For us, Jesus’ response, “It is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness” is about as helpful as a cake recipe without the ingredients. Without knowing the spiritual context and nuances of language of the time, we can only guess what that meant to John. But here are some thoughts about why baptism was important for Jesus, and why Jesus’ baptism is important for *us*.

First, Jesus went into the water because it was his work place. Somewhere in his human bones, the Christ “through whom all things were made” stirred at the sight of the water, and recognized it as the nursery of new life. That muddy water was the fresh spring that would flow from the pierced side of the Lamb of God. It was the living water that sustains life everlasting. The Christ of God had worked with this water at creation. He knew it and it knew Him, and so He went into the water to continue his creative work.

Second, Jesus waded into the water because the sinners were there. His ministry was to anyone who was ever called a “viper,” especially if the name-calling was deserved. The sinners were driven into the water by the lash of John’s tongue, by the guilt in their hearts, and by the promise of a Messiah who would recognize their repentance and somehow—by some miracle—include them among the righteous. Jesus always had a soft spot for people who knew their need of God, and here was a river full of them. He waded in to claim his flock.

Third, Jesus took his stand among the sinners because he knew there was only one sin he was really capable of, one transgression with his name on it. This was the temptation to think of himself as special, as separate and not really one of the people. It was becoming

quite clear that Jesus was awfully much like God, or like God's special son. But Jesus' mission was to show us how to find God within each other. So any suggestion that he was not really one of us—not really human or not really a common man from Galilee—is fatal to that mission. Jesus started his ministry where we all start, in the waters of baptism that brings the same Spirit of God into each of us.

When we celebrate the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ, and whenever we witness a baptism and renew our own baptismal covenant, we go down into the water again and then come out given life and new life. We come out renewed in our own ministry, a baptismal ministry which is for all of us. When we revisit our baptisms over and over, we drink of that living water as often as we approach the altar to drink from the cup of salvation. All of us are called to go down into the water and be transformed by Christ. All of us go under the water seeming to be merely human and emerge with our divinity buoying us up in our first resurrection. As people of new life in our baptism, we can then be diving instructors, life guards, and towel attendants at the baptism of a world. We are called to this baptismal ministry because so many people don't know about Jesus and the water, and it is our task to make that known, make known Jesus the Son of God, the promise of eternal life, who gives us living water.

People don't know that they can be revived. Isaiah promises hope and new life to the brokenhearted and the despairing, promises that God would "open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." We are sent by Christ to bring this news to the African AIDs orphans, to parents working two and three jobs to keep bread on the table, to people blinded by resentment or imprisoned by drugs or abuse. People don't know that Jesus went into the water to call people to be re-created, renewed, and revived. In our baptismal ministry, we are called to gather the distracted, the strayed, the exhausted, and to lead them into the refreshing depths of Christ's love. Let the waters of his love wash away the dust of their discouragement, and give them new hearts and a new spirit.

People don't know that God loves sinners so much that he'd rather have a feast with fools than a banquet with the self-righteous. Jesus gathered the outcasts and the outlaws and made them heirs of the Kingdom of God. Jesus shows by being baptized, and we re-learn at every baptism we witness here, that in baptism we are all equal—rich and poor, young and old, righteous and reprobate. We are equally loved, equally forgiven, equally redeemed.

Jesus, in being baptized by John in the Jordan River next to all of that brood of vipers, taught us how to live with all those others. He teaches us that we cannot shout the Good News from a safe place on the shore. We cannot keep our shoes dry and our gloves clean. Saving souls will take us into dirty and dubious places, but the most dangerous will be the drawing rooms of flattery and praise for our own goodness. If we ourselves are to "fulfill all righteousness," we need to go into the midst of God's people, not feeling "elevated" above their lives. We are to live and work in this world with the pragmatism of a carpenter, the hop of a fisherman, and the gratitude of someone from whom seven demons have been cast out. That is the baptismal ministry to which all of us are called.

May we all live into our baptism and, with God's help, fulfill all righteous as Jesus showed us how.