



BAPTISM

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Sunday, January 27, 2008

Lection - Matthew 3:13-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v.13) Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

(v.14) John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (v.15) But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. (v.16) And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. (v.17) And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Baptism comes from the Greek word (*baptizō*) meaning to intensively immerse in water. The word also connotes ceremonial washing for purification. For the Christian community, baptism symbolically establishes or affirms a person’s relationship with God. While often associated with the ministry of John the Baptist, baptism is—in the most radical sense—a willingness to join Jesus in death (Mark 10:38 and Romans 6:3). John’s baptism anticipated the Messiah to come. Today, baptism honors the Messiah who has come, acknowledges the Messiah who is, and awaits the Messiah who is coming again.

African American churches conduct baptism in various ways. Some baptize persons after they publicly confess their faith in Jesus Christ. Others baptize infants or children on the basis of family members’ faith in Jesus Christ and the family’s connection with that particular congregation. Also, the method of administration varies from full immersion to pouring or sprinkling of water. Seriousness and celebration surround African American services of baptism; for the person being baptized both dies and rises to new life simultaneously.

For more information, consult Lars Hartman, “Baptism,” in The Anchor Bible Dictionary, volume I, ed. David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992, pp 583-594.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Matthew 3:13-17

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Thirty years have passed since my father—and my pastor—immersed me in the chilly waters of the baptismal pool at First Baptist Church in Salem, VA. I still hear the voices surrounding that moment. The choir resolutely sang about God who was “gonna trouble the waters.” As the choir lowered their voices, my father raised his: “On the profession of your faith, and in the presence of God, the angels, and this company, I now baptize you...”

Those baptismal waters marked me as a person standing on God’s side. *Standing with* God can at times mean *standing against* forces that deny God’s justice and peace. My baptism, while an intensely personal moment, possesses profound political implications. It declares on whose side I am standing.

Not long ago, I took a stand in a public speech against certain practices of the United States Government that were as much acts of *terrorism* as the terrorism the United States is currently fighting around the world. The speech became the subject of public debate in the editorials of the local newspaper. Some people were enraged that I could equate the United States with other terrorist groups.

In one acidic editorial, a person questioned my patriotic loyalty and asked the question, “Braxton, are you with us?” When confronted with this kind of question, my baptismal identity requires me to ask, “Which ‘us’ are you talking about?” There may be an “us” that our baptismal identity won’t allow us to join because of our allegiance with the “us” struggling for justice, peace, and non-violence.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In Matthew 3:13-17, Jesus’ baptism declares his readiness for the political and religious revolution represented by the kingdom of heaven. In the synoptic Gospels, only Matthew presents this curious dialogue between Jesus and John prior to the baptism. Jesus is eager to submit to John’s baptism. In Matthew 3:14, however, John’s resistance meets Jesus’ readiness. Recognizing Jesus’ superiority, John urges a role reversal, protesting that Jesus should baptize him. After some persuading, John eventually concedes and baptizes Jesus.

Many New Testament scholars contend that Matthew uses this dialogue to address a *Messianic embarrassment* troubling some followers of Jesus. Certain early Christians may have inquired, “Why would Jesus, a sinless Messiah, submit to John’s baptism, which was for the repentance of sins?”

According to Matthew, Jesus submits to John’s baptism not because of any need to repent of sin but rather to “fulfill all righteousness” (v. 15). Interpreters debate extensively the meaning of “to fulfill all righteousness,” especially since the word *righteousness* carries numerous connotations.

For many Christians, the word *righteousness* evokes thoughts of personal piety and the state of a person's *soul* or *conscience* before God. Such meanings are inherent in the term *righteousness*. Yet often the Christian tradition has emphasized the *personal* aspects of righteousness to the exclusion of the *political* aspects of righteousness. Therefore, we frequently ignore the revolutionary characteristics of John and Jesus.

Righteousness also signifies God's saving action in the world. We might even translate the Greek word for righteousness (*dikaionē*) as *justice*. Righteousness encapsulates God's passionate commitment to set right the things that are wrong in society¹. In other words, righteousness is also a matter of *social justice*.

Thus, Jesus' submission to John's baptism is no simple act of personal piety. On the contrary, Jesus discerns that John's baptism and fiery preaching constitute a revolutionary declaration about a new world order where God will set right all that "the establishment" (in Jerusalem and Rome) has twisted. Jesus wants to be a part of this revolution. By pleading with John to baptize him in order to fulfill all (God's) righteousness, Jesus in effect says, "Through this baptism, I 'take up arms' with you, John, and join this revolution whereby God's justice will be manifest in the world." By submitting to John's baptism, Jesus declares, "I am ready for the revolution!"

Other textual clues indicate the political and religious radicalism of John and Jesus. John's baptismal activity occurs in the wilderness (Matthew 3:1). In the first century CE, the word *wilderness* increasingly obtained a subversive significance. Historical accounts approximately during the time of Jesus attest to social protest movements around Judea against the ruling establishments where the agitators led their followers into the wilderness.

Thus, John's choice of the wilderness and Jesus' willingness to join him there would have carried a subversive symbolism, especially given the popularity of John's movement. John's revolution, which people joined through repentance and baptism, declared that God's true power would emerge on the margins of the society (the wilderness) and not in the center of the establishment (Jerusalem and Rome).

Still another indicator of the revolutionary commitment of John and Jesus is the centrality of repentance in their proclamation. Excessive, sentimental use has blunted the sharp edge of the word *repentance*. Repentance involves more than an admission of wrong. The Greek word for repentance (*metanoia*) connotes a change of *mindset*. To repent is to adopt a new mindset that causes a person to turn around. Repentance is a revolutionary act, creating a new way of imagining the world. Both John and Jesus assert that only those with new mindsets will be fit for the new kingdom.

Furthermore, the means by which John and Jesus meet their deaths should convince even the most hardened skeptics about the revolutionary nature of their ministries. Neither dies of "old age" or "natural causes." Both are the victims of *government-sponsored execution*.

Challenge

By stepping into the Jordan River with John, Jesus signs his own death certificate. The church would look so different if we truly lived out the revolutionary implications of baptism. Unfortunately, throughout Christian history, believers often have spent more time fighting over the mode of baptism (e.g., immersion, sprinkling, in the name of the Trinity, or in Jesus' name only) than fathoming the depths of its meaning. The next time I baptize someone, I will be sure to ask that person, "Are you really ready for this revolution? It may just cost you your life!"

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The sounds of the Jordan River (v. 13); the dialogue between John and Jesus (vv. 14-15); the voice from heaven (v. 17);

Sights: The Jordan River (v. 13); John (whose clothing is described in v. 4); the opening of the heavens (v. 16); the descending of the Spirit of God (v. 16); Jesus²;

Smells: The scent of the Jordan River (v. 13);

Tastes: John's meals (locusts and wild honey) (v. 4); and

Textures: John's clothing (v. 4); the sensation of the waters of the Jordan River upon the skin of John and Jesus (v. 16).

Stories and Quotations

The New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman provocatively addresses the political, even revolutionary, nature of the ministries of John and Jesus. He writes:

If, for example, Jesus had simply been a great moral teacher, a gentle rabbi who did nothing more than urge his devoted followers to love God and one another... then he would scarcely have been seen as a threat to the social order and nailed to a cross. Great moral teachers were not crucified—unless their teachings were considered subversive. Nor were charismatic leaders with large followings—unless their followers were thought to be dangerous... John the Baptist was imprisoned and executed because of his preaching... Jesus was to fare no better.³

Notes

1. Long, Thomas G. Matthew. Westminster Bible companion. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. p. 33.
2. For a recent artistic reconstruction of Jesus' face, which depicts his African-Asian features, consult Mike Fillon's article "Real Face of Jesus," in *Popular Mechanics*, December 2002. Online location: <http://www.popularmechanics.com/science/research/1282186.html> accessed 22 October 2007.

3. Ehrman, Bart D. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. p. 233.

¹ Thomas G. Long, "Matthew." Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, p. 33.

² For a recent artistic reconstruction of Jesus' face, which depicts his African-Asian features, consult Mike Fillon's article "Real Face of Jesus," in *Popular Mechanic*, December 2002. It can be found online at <http://www.popularmechanics.com/science/research/1282186.html> (accessed October 22, 2007).