

First Sunday after Epiphany

Baptism of Our Lord

Year A

[RCL] Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

The Baptism of Our Lord

God, our strength and our hope, grant us the courage of John the Baptist, constantly to speak the truth and boldly to rebuke injustice, with eyes open to recognize God among us.

We are in the season of Epiphany, the season of growing light, the season of the Magi and the revelation of Christ to all the nations, the season when we celebrate Christ's baptism, and the miracle of the wedding at Cana. The season when we celebrate Christ as the light of the world. A time to reflect on mission and unity.

In today's gospel passage from Matthew, we read the story of an encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus. Who was John the Baptist? Why was he baptizing at the Jordan River, and why was Jesus there?

John is considered a historical figure who is included in the accounts of the contemporary historian Josephus. According to Josephus, John was a popular prophet and holy man who was a contemporary of Jesus. Herod was afraid that his popularity might lead to an uprising and had him imprisoned, and later killed. John is recognized by Christians as the prophet foretold to prepare the way of the Lord. His life is closely linked with that of Jesus. The celebration of the birth of John the Baptist, six months before Christmas Eve, may be the oldest commemoration of a saint, dating back at least to 500 C.E. when the feast was celebrated much like Christmas in the early church.

Let's start by noting that John did not invent baptism. In the book of Leviticus, God instructed the people of Israel to cleanse themselves from impurities, especially before sacrificing in the temple. Ritual cleansing before approaching God was a part of Jewish life. Special pools called mikvehs were constructed for the purpose. Immersion in a natural body of water, especially flowing water, could effect the ritual of purification. Archaeological remains of mikvehs from the time of John and Jesus have been uncovered in Israel and in other ancient Jewish communities.

The Jewish world in first century Judea was diverse. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were two sects of established temple religion, while the Essenes were a renewal movement that lived an ascetic life in the desert at Qumran, in opposition to what they saw as the corruption of Jerusalem and the temple. After centuries of oppressive rule by foreign powers, the Essenes heard the words of the prophet Isaiah, and looked for the promised Messiah. Life in the desert community protested the worldliness and corruption of Jewish worship in Jerusalem, and the oppressive, colonial rule of the Romans. The

Essene rule of life placed emphasis on purity, ritual bathing, and obedience to God's commandments, to be ready for the coming of the Messiah and God's kingdom. The ruins at Qumran include the mikveh for ritual immersion. It has been speculated that John the Baptist was a member of the Essene community; certainly he had some beliefs and practices in common with the Essenes.

Thus John, like Jesus, was a Jewish man who led a renewal movement within Judaism. People were deeply stirred by the words, deeds, and example of the holy man, John. Picture a revival meeting, down by the river, folks wading into the water to proclaim the renewal of their faith, emerging clean and ready to encounter God. A popular movement, from the grassroots, countering what they considered to be the corruption and petrification of the religious structure of temple worship centered in Jerusalem. Jesus may have been a follower of John; certainly he would have heard of John and his message of repentance; he traveled all the way from Galilee to the Judean desert to be baptized by him. John had a genuine calling to ministry, one that Jesus recognized and sought out.

In turn, John recognizes Jesus' ministry. Indeed John says he is not worthy to carry Jesus' sandals, and hesitates to baptize one whom he recognizes as God's anointed. But Jesus respects John's ministry, and he insists: "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Jesus comes up from the waters of baptism, his faith and purpose renewed and sealed, ready to begin his public ministry. And God's spirit descends on him like a dove, and God's voice, echoing the prophecy of Isaiah, says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." John and Jesus have acted together in obedience to God. Encouraged by John and anointed by God, Jesus is ready to follow the straight path that has been laid for him.

God is certainly pleased that Jesus is ready to commit to a mission and ministry of justice. Perhaps he is also pleased that Jesus and John have come together. The two ministries were inter-related. Both preached a message of repentance and renewal, freedom and justice. In John 2: 35-42, we learn that Jesus' first two disciples were drawn from the followers of John the Baptist. In John 3: 22-30, we find John and Jesus baptizing side by side. They share a common message, criticizing corruption and calling for the cleansing of public life. They urge their followers to live a life worthy of the kingdom of God.

For Christians, baptism is a public proclamation of faith and intention to live a life that pleases God. When we renew our baptismal vows, we promise to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to resist evil, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

It is no coincidence that the World Council of Churches' Week of Prayer for Christian Unity occurs during the season of Epiphany, with its themes of mission, unity, cooperation, and ecumenism. During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, congregations and parishes all over the world exchange preachers or arrange special ecumenical celebrations and prayer services.

We can easily imagine a pulpit exchange between Jesus and John. Perhaps we can envision ourselves

joining in that special ecumenical prayer service and celebration of common baptismal vows of faith, respect, justice, and peace.

Together we might promise to renew our commitment to our covenant as God's people, to repent of our blindness, to rejoice that God sent Jesus to be the light of the nations, to show us the way of justice for all.

Together we might go forth, delighting God, delighted by God, strengthened in our own ministry and mission to live and work in hope, unity, and peace.

Let us close with the lyrical language of Isaiah 42: Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

Gracious God, we thank you for your anointing in the waters of baptism, for your powerful voice, for your strength, and for your blessing of peace and unity.

(To the people): Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

(Response): I WILL, WITH GOD'S HELP.

Amen.

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