

Wading in the Water with us....

January 11, 2009

Matthew 3:1-17

Today we consider the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism. This is a moment of many questions for some Christians... What does John's baptism mean? And why does Jesus submit to John's baptism anyway?

John's baptism is foretold by the angel Gabriel, archangel of God, who stands in the very presence of God—in the presence of pure light, pure energy, pure love. John comes in the spirit of Elijah, the Old Testament prophet. He comes as the last of a long line of Prophets who predicted and prepared the way for God's promised messiah/savior of the world. John is the last and in some way the first of the New Covenant's Heralds to proclaim the good news of great joy.

John is in the spirit of Elijah because Elijah called the people away from wickedness and from false religion and false worship and back to a true and right relationship with God.

John preached a message of change and repentance. This is a message we don't want to hear today. When I say the word repentance, what image do you get in your head? If you are like me and or like most people, you get the image of a fiery preacher who is dressed in a bright colored leisure suit with slicked back hair and a huge black bible (sorry, it was the only color they had with I bought this one!) who is pointing his finger at you and yelling! I remember a fellow who used to come to the college campus when I was a Fresno State called Holy Hubert...he was a fire and brimstone preacher who would insult people and get the crowd so mad! I remember it because I was part of a campus ministry and we had worked for months on an outreach ministry and brought in a great speaker who was thoughtful and scholarly and reasonable and it

was going to kick off a week's worth of activities on Monday with a huge debate on Friday and a concert etc...and then on Friday afternoon Holy Hubert shows up!!!! Argh! We tried to drag him off the campus, to argue with him and to use scripture to stop him and we tried to pray him off the campus!!! That seem to work the best!

That is not the image of repentance that you should have! The fire and brimstone approach really does not work.

But, John preached a message of change, which is not popular today because some object to the idea of moral absolutes. Today, many practice relativism...where everything is relative, where absolute right and wrong does not exist and to say that it does makes people very nervous. You can only say that something is wrong for you...not that it is wrong for everyone. To do so is to be considered judgmental. But we can hold opinions without being opinionated or obstinate. We can be moral without being moralistic. We can be righteous without being self-righteous.

Some things are wrong, and we know it. We know it in our hearts. If we attempt to follow Christ, his spirit speaks to our hearts and our consciences feel this thing called guilt. Now sometimes we have too finely tuned a guilt meter and we feel guilty over things that are not our fault and could never ever be considered our fault...but when we do something wrong, we generally know it. We have all done things we know we should not have done...and we have not done things that we know we should have. We have not stood up for the person who was picked on or who needed our help...we have not helped when we know we could have or should have. We have been self centered or selfish or ugly in some way...

We don't have to watch the local or world News for very long to see that there is indeed evil in the world, and we know that it is in us too to some degree.

John called people to deal with this honestly. To repent of their sins. To repent is the same root word in Greek as to change MetaMorphosis... in this case it is "To change directions, or literally "to change one's face or to turn". To change course.

His baptism was considered an insult by the Jewish leaders of the day. They considered themselves to be God's chosen people. They were Abraham's offspring, they were God's elect, they followed the law and lived in God's chosen city where the temple of God dwelled. Baptism existed in Jewish tradition before John came upon the scene, but it was reserved for the non-Jewish Gentile person who might occasionally (rarely) convert to Judaism. That person was considered utterly unclean by the Jews. So before they could be brought into the temple to be circumcised and become part of the Jewish community they must first have the filth washed off of them. This was their thinking, not mine, you understand.

But then along comes John. John says "you think your special do you...you're no better than anyone else. You just like anyone else before God...you're sinners just like the rest of the world and if you want to be forgive you have to repent and turn back to God and YOU...yes, YOU Jew have to come and be baptized and have the filth washed off YOU before you can come to God...and you better hurry, because God's Messiah is coming and I mean soon! Come on in, the water is fine!"

John reminds everyone that they are all sinners in need of God's grace and Jews and Gentiles stand alike before God. John's favorite illustration is that of the road...making the highway straight and the

path smooth. Some parts of your life are too high. You have too much of some things. Maybe you have let an area of your life become too time consuming, or you devote too much of yourself to things that don't matter. It's time to cut some of these things down to size. And there are some things in our lives that are shallow...that are valleys and need filling in. We need to spend more time with our kids or with our friends or spouse or in prayer...we need to begin to fill in some of the potholes in our lives and make the path smooth.

Part of John's message still resonates with us today...a sense of urgency is heard in John, Jesus is coming. And Jesus is still coming. We never know when he might come or when we might go, or something might happen. The world is always changing. Our circumstances are always changing and there is never another day like today. It is not easy, it is not over night. But today is a new day...this is the day the Lord has made...today is the day of God's salvation.

John was sent from God to preach a message of hope and change, calling us to repentance and to draw near. This is a message that still resonate with us today. This is especially true with our celebration of communion.

What then of Jesus' baptism? Why does Jesus come to be baptized by John? John is clear that of all the people in the world, Jesus is the only one who does not need to repent and be baptized. John felt unworthy even to untie Jesus sandals—to be his servant—much less to baptize him! You should be baptizing me, John said, not the other way around!

Jesus' response is important. He says, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."

Jesus came to be with us as human being. He came as God among us, Emmanuel. Last week, Rev. Charlotte Pizzo drew her sermon from the

Apostle Paul's great Christological statement in his letter to the Colossians in which he says that Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God and that the fullness of deity dwells within Jesus...that Jesus was with God in the beginning and that through Jesus all things were created. Jesus and God are one. God comes to be among us, God comes to show himself to us, God comes to save us...in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. As the Bible Says, God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

It is indeed heady stuff. So here we have Jesus, the Son of God...God incarnate...who comes to join the line of those who come to be baptized. And Jesus steps in line with the rest of the sinners. He steps in line with us, with you and me. Jesus comes into the world, all the way in. He holds nothing back, but gets into the water with us...into the muddy water of the Jordan River all the way. He submits and becomes like you and me.

Immediately the heavens can not contain their joy and pleasure,
"This is my beloved Son, IN WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED!"

Jesus joins us on the journey of life...Lo, I am with you always

He is with us,

 He washes us clean

 He forgives us

 He restores us

 He loves us and heals us

 He is with us through it all.....