

Baptism of Our Lord Year A 2023 Matthew 3:13-17

My first teaching job out of college was in a newly remodeled building, so newly remodeled that we almost didn't start the school year on time. The day I went for my interview the work crew was pouring a new floor, so I had to enter the building by climbing through an office window. Unfortunately, that turned out to be a good indication of how the rest of that year was going to go. First impressions can be very informative.

In our gospel reading for today, Matthew gives us his first impression of Jesus, or at least his first impression of Jesus as an adult. Matthew skips Luke's story of the adolescent Jesus staying behind in the Temple to discuss theology with the religious teachers, so this is the first thing Matthew has to say about Jesus since the holy family's return from Egypt after King Herod's death. Jesus goes to the Jordan to his cousin John to be baptized. John seems to be aware of Jesus' divine nature: perhaps the members of their extended family told stories of the prophecies, angelic messengers, and unique circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth; or John may have grown up watching his cousin do miraculous things; or maybe John himself was the recipient of direct divine revelation. However he arrives at this knowledge, John, implying that Jesus outranks him, asks why Jesus comes to him be baptized, when it should be the other way around. Jesus claims this is proper to *fulfill all righteousness*—whatever that means—so John baptizes Jesus. As soon as he comes up out of the water, the heavens are opened to him—whatever *that* means—the Spirit of God descends like a dove and rests on him, and a voice from heaven says—not to Jesus, but about him: *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased.*

John preached repentance and baptized people who came to him confessing their sins, so we can understand why he is reluctant to baptize Jesus. Being fully divine, Jesus is without sin, so he doesn't need baptism for forgiveness. The other people who came to John at the Jordan sought baptism as a sign of repentance, turning from one path to pursue a new life; but there is nothing for which Jesus would need to repent and no new ethos by which he would begin to live. When Jesus says righteousness is fulfilled in this act, he's not talking about the way in which we think of ourselves being made righteous through baptism. But perhaps what happens here isn't a complicated, mystical, spiritual transformation, but just a simple first impression—a public sign not just that Jesus is the Beloved Son of God, but what that means for him and for us who follow him.

We might not recognize it, because it is certainly rare in our culture, but Jesus' request for baptism shows genuine humility. The Son of God, who embodies the character of God, doesn't

arrive at the river with pomp and circumstance, pushing John out of the way and taking over. In the course of his public ministry, Jesus will teach, heal, and eventually save the world through *humble* service—a servant like Isaiah describes: not shouting to be heard, or breaking what is already bruised, or quenching the dimly burning wick, but faithfully bringing justice. So Jesus' first public act is not a grand display of power; it's not even really *doing* anything, but humbly submitting to John's baptism. Jesus' public life could have started anywhere, but he chose to show up in the wilderness with those who were confessing their sins and turning to follow a more life-giving path. If we're reading this gospel because we want to know who Jesus really is, Matthew wants our first impression to be of God fully and humbly present with us—and present with us even as we're confessing our sin and longing for a better way of life, not just present with us when we've made progress on that journey and corrected the errors of our ways.

Matthew paints a stunning picture of the boundary between heaven and earth opening up, of the Spirit appearing like a dove to unite with Jesus, of the heavenly voice naming and claiming Jesus. We are invited to imagine, as many artists have, what a manifestation of God's Spirit would have looked like, how God's voice would have sounded reverberating from heaven. But the detail that fascinates me the most is that the Father calls Jesus *beloved*, and announces *with [him] I am well pleased...before* Jesus has begun the signs and wonders of his ministry. God's love and affirmation are not the result or reward of Jesus' teaching and preaching, of his healing and feeding thousands. It's not a well-deserved attaboy for overcoming 40 days of temptation in the wilderness, which hasn't happened yet. This is not a proclamation, *well done, good and faithful servant*, after Jesus has suffered on the cross. Here, before he does anything else, Jesus gets down into the muddy river with sinners, and there he is named *beloved and well-pleasing Son*.

The rest of the gospel—Matthew's and the other three—flesh out who God is by showing us how the Son of God lived—what he taught, how he interacted with all sorts of people, where he went and with whom, what he did. As disciples, that's our example. Some days we'll do better than others at following Jesus' teaching and obeying Jesus preaching, at living and behaving in ways that are consistent with Jesus' humble, merciful, faithful lovingkindness to a world that was not very humble, merciful, faithful, or loving back. But whether we're having a good discipleship day or a bad discipleship day, we are still, always, already, from the start, beloved children of God who is with us right where we are, wherever we are. Thanks be to God who, from the very first to the absolute end, is with us.