

Sermon: A Question of Identity
Text: Matthew 3:13-17
Date: January 12, 2020
Context: WWPC
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*And a voice from heaven said,
'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'*

Matthew 3:17

At first no one knows who he is.

The last any of us readers knew, Joseph and Mary had bundled up their brand new baby and took flight for Egypt.

Like millions of refugees since then, like tens of thousands of refugees at this very moment, the threat of political violence at home forced them to flee, forced them to seek safety and refuge in a country other than their own.

Eventually Joseph receives yet another angelic visitation in a dream -- his third since this whole extraordinary ordeal with Mary began -- informing him that it is finally safe to return home, that -- and I'm quoting the angel verbatim here -- "those who were seeking the child's life are dead."

In Matthew's gospel that is the last thing we know about the early life of Jesus until this moment, the last thing we know until he finally reappears in the story as a full-grown adult.

Presumably that is the last thing anyone outside his family knows about Jesus until this moment.

This moment when he reconnects with his cousin, John. Thirty years earlier, John leapt in his mother's womb the first time he met Jesus when he was still in Mary's womb. Here, now, beside this river, their stories intersect again.

According to the entire Gospel record, Jesus has not yet preached a single sermon, not offered a word of instruction to his disciples, mainly because he does not yet have any.

He's done no acts of ministry, has not healed anyone, has not performed even a minor miracle.

By all these measures he's just an ordinary guy, indistinguishable from all the other folks standing in that line, waiting for the chance for their sins to be washed away.

So it's a safe bet that at this point no one knows who he is. As I was pondering this point earlier this week, it occurred to me that maybe this is true of him, too. Maybe Jesus himself does not yet know who he is.

In any case, there he is, standing in line in front of, let's say, Ehud, Jerusalem's best butcher. What people don't know is that Ehud uses rigged weights on his scale to weigh his meats and cheat his customers out of a few shekels on every transaction.

And he's standing behind, let's say, Simon who uses cooked up excuses to leave Jerusalem and visit outlying villages, where he cheats on his wife.

It turns out that, deep down, both men know what they're doing is wrong. Ehud doesn't really need the ill-gotten gain.

His customers are very loyal. So loyal in fact that, over time, and with the help of his rigged scale, they've made him comfortably well off.

He has more money than almost everyone who walks into his shop to buy the chicken they will serve for Shabbat and the lamb they will serve at Passover.

As for Simon he honestly loves his wife. She has given him three beautiful children, two daughters and a son, and he loves them, too.

She cooks and cares for them and for him. She goes with him to Temple every Sabbath. She is his faithful and beautiful wife. Deep down he loves her and he hates himself for cheating on her.

Which is why both men have made the trek out from Jerusalem and are now standing in the long line that snakes along the west bank of the River Jordan.

They want a new start. They want to be washed clean. To make things right with Yahweh and with themselves.

So, then, the question is, why is Jesus standing there in line with them, waiting for his turn to be dunked?

One commentator I read suggested that he's laying the groundwork, setting the example, for our own baptisms.

Except he's really not. At least not as I read this story.

John is very clear about this: His is a baptism of repentance. As he understands it, this is, theologically, a chance to be forgiven, for your sins to be washed away.

He calls on the people who have traveled out to meet him to repent. He doesn't mean to just turn around and head back to Jerusalem once they towel off and put their sandals back on.

When he calls them to repent he is charging them to live differently. To stop using a rigged scale, to stop lying about where they are going at night. To stop cheating on their customers and their wives.

This is not how we understand baptism in the Reformed tradition. Whether we are baptizing adults or children, we don't baptize people out of something -- out of a life of sin -- we baptize them into something -- into the family of God.

It's not an act of repentance, a chance to be forgiven, even saved.

It is a declaration of the covenant God made with us, to be Emmanuel, God with and for us forever, a way to declare that everyone is loved by God and is welcome to become a member of the family of God, including, especially, the little girl or the grown man who is now being baptized.

So it is worth asking, if John's is a baptism of repentance and forgiveness, and if Jesus is the spotless Son of God, why is he there? This is not a simple rhetorical question, intended to help drive this sermon forward.

This is a genuine theological conundrum that has troubled scholars and preachers and the church at large for centuries, starting with the four writers who first recorded this event.

Mark gets the ball rolling with the briefest account of this sacramental encounter. *In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.* The end. Plain and simple. No dialogue, no commentary, minimal facts.

Luke is not quite so comfortable with the proceedings. He refuses to name John as the Baptizer, and talks about the event in the past tense...*when Jesus had been baptized and was praying, the heavens opened.*

The gospel writer John appears to be so uncomfortable with the subject he seems almost evasive. He has John the Baptist confessing that he saw a dove descending on Jesus, but there's no mention of the actual baptism at all.

For his part, Matthew takes this aversion one step further. As we heard in our reading for today, he has John try to talk Jesus out of it. *John would have prevented him,* the text says.

Why is Jesus there? Why does the spotless son of God need to participate in a baptism of repentance? It appears even the Gospel writers struggled with that question.

So, the honest answer is no one knows for sure.

Maybe because on some intuitive level Jesus understood that the way into his ministry was to head down into those waters.

Maybe because he is still trying to figure out his own identity -- who he is and what he is called to do.

And maybe he understands that to be fully human he's got to take his spot in that line, to take his place among the brokenhearted and the disillusioned, the guilt-ridden and the shame-filled, the sorrowful ones, the ones longing to be washed clean, the ones desperate for a fresh start, the ones hungry for a new beginning.

If he's going to minister to these same people, to heal their wounds, to liberate them from their various prisons, he's got to hear their stories, understand their lives, feel the pain of their struggles.

So maybe that's also why Jesus lets himself be baptized. If he is going to become the Christ of God, the very Incarnation of Love itself, he first has become who he was born to be: Jesus of Nazareth, the ordinary human being.

And the only way to do that is to go down into the same water they do, to share in the same baptism in which they share.

In the end, we don't know what Jesus was thinking that day, or his exact reasons for taking his place in that line along with Ehad and Simon and scores of other ordinary folks who heeded John's call to repent and be washed clean.

But we do know this: if his identity was in question that day, that question was answered decisively the moment he came up out of that water.

And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' From that moment on, Jesus's identity is settled.

It is, in effect, his own service of installation and ordination, because from this moment on he is marked for a particular purpose: to serve these people, to heal them and love them, to liberate and even save them, to become the Christ, to become Emanuel, God with them and for them.

Whether or not Jesus intended to set an example for us, it is true that for two millennia, Christians have followed him into the waters of baptism. We do this in part for the same reason he did: because baptism tells us not only who we are but whose we are.

It marks us as members of God's own community, a gathering of people in which God's love is made real to us in a gracious hug, a bowl of soup delivered to our doorstep when we're too sick or too sad to move.

It is how we become the church, a faith-based community where we lay our hearts open to God's transforming power, and where we lay our hearts open to one another. Where we cry together and sing together. Where we grieve together and rejoice together. Where we pray and worship together.

Where we believe, and where we know, that the God who spoke those words to Jesus is speaking them still, to all of us:

You are my beloved child with whom I am well pleased, and I will be God with you and for you forever.