



# The Trinity Pulpit



## Shall We Gather at the River Matthew 3:13-17

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August 30, 2009

Jesus burst onto the scene in Matthew 3. The gospels are quiet about the life of Jesus throughout what would be considered his early adulthood. The last word we have of Jesus growing up in Nazareth is the episode of Jesus and his parents at the Temple in Luke 2. All we are told is that Jesus returned to Nazareth with his parents and that he grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man. Then the gospels are silent until, as Matthew puts it, in Matthew 3 it says “in those days.” Matthew begins this chapter with “In those days.” In the Bible that phrase has more of a meaning than a period of time, but it is a way of announcing something new is going to occur. “In those days” is a way of telling us that God was preparing to do something unexpected. “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the Desert of Judea”(3:1). John’s message was simple: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” The people were to turn back to God because God was preparing to do something new and wonderful.

We are told that John was a bit eccentric in dress, diet, and methodology. Yet, the people of Judea were responding. People were coming out into the desert and responding to this prophet. The desert is not supposed to be the center of religious life; the Temple was the center of religious life, but people were not going to the temple to repent and find God. Instead, they were going to the desert and to the Jordan River; there, people were confessing their sins and being baptized by John. The religious leaders objected and went out themselves

to hear John and see what was happening. John had a strong word of condemnation for these leaders. He essentially told them that being a child of God was more than being a descendent of Abraham. What was needed was a change of heart.

This is the scene when Jesus reappears in the gospel. Jesus becomes one of the ones who appear at the Jordan for baptism. John, who by the way is the cousin of Jesus, knows the story of Jesus. He knows the promise of Jesus and so at first he is unwilling to baptize Jesus. In fact, John says “I need to be baptized by you.” Yet, Jesus says “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness”(3:15). John baptizes Jesus, and at that moment, there is the epiphany of the Spirit of God descending upon Jesus and a voice that says “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

What exactly happened down at the river that day? Jesus’ baptism has always been a moment that has caused discussion. There is a mystery of why Jesus was baptized and what its purpose was. Let’s think for a moment about what happened down by the riverside.

First, let’s consider the whole thought of baptism. Christian baptism, or the baptism of the church, has different meanings depending on how you practice baptism. For some it is an initiation into the church – it is sign of belonging more

than it is a sign of transformation. For some, it is the literal washing away of sin. For others it is a symbol, or witness to an inner transformation of heart that is the result of confession of sins and belief in Jesus as Christ.

What was John's baptism? What we know is that baptism was not John's invention. This was nothing new. In fact, the gospel treats baptism as something that would have been natural for people to do in response to John's preaching. There are no questions about what are you doing. What is this ceremony and rite you are practicing? John baptizing seems an acceptable practice. Many believe that John's baptism was much like a Jewish Mikvah.

A Jewish Mikvah is a ceremonial baptismal cleansing. The word *baptism* does mean "to dip or immerse". The pools used for a Mikvah indicate a total body cleansing. The Jewish Mikvah, which has become very popular in many areas of our country, is a moment of ceremonial cleansing and purification. It can be performed over and over again. The Jewish person immerses oneself into the bath and experiences cleansing. Life is the most important thing in Jewish theology. Whenever death comes in contact with life there needs to be a cleansing. A person can choose this cleansing at any time they think they need to prepare for a moment. It might be for a feast or it might be for a time of transition in life. The Mikvah was like John's baptism in that it was immersion, and in a sense, it was where spiritual life and death were meeting.

Others think that John's baptism was a form of Jewish proselyte baptism. Gentiles who had become God fearers would many times be baptized a symbol of identification with Judaism. Thus this type of baptism was a symbol of belonging and initiation into the people of God. The form this baptism took was a self pouring. You poured water over yourself as part of this baptismal act.

The final background for John's baptism may have been the baptism of the Essenes at Qumran. The Essenes were a community of Judaism that had separated themselves from others. They lived in the desert as a way of being different from culture. They practiced immersion baptism as a symbolic rite of being called out from others and forming a new community of believers that were preparing for a new age with God. The fact that John was announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God and that John was baptizing in the desert and asking people to identify with God in a new fashion leads some to believe that John's baptism had for its background the Essene community.

This background can be argued as it has been for centuries, but what I want us to focus on for just a few moments as we come to the Lord's Table are some other characteristics which were present down at the river. What do we find at the river?

We find repentance. John is calling the people to repentance. Some believe John's baptism was for the repentance of sins, a cleansing. Others say John's baptism was a symbol of a repentance that had already occurred in the heart of the participant. Yet, others say it was a baptism for the calling to repentance. In other words, the baptism was the first step on a road of many steps of turning to God.

One of the problems we have with Jesus' baptism is if Jesus is without sin, then why does he need to participate in a baptism that involves repentance?

This is why I favor that John's baptism was a call to repentance and a new way of life. Not that Jesus needed to repent or go in a new direction, although the vocation of his life was changing. I think that baptism is the beginning of repentance and a call to a new direction in life. Too many times we view baptism as the end of sanctification and not the beginning. When we come to Christ, we are just begin-

ning to walk in the newness of God's life. We are taking the first step toward a new direction in life. Baptism, then, becomes the outward witness that we have repented; however, it is just the first step in a life of many other steps in God's direction and not our own.

Who comes to the baptismal waters? Is it not sinners who have come to the realization that Christ has died for their sins and they have confessed their sins? Baptism is not for the perfected, it is for the one who has come to the decision that a new process must begin in their lives. Baptism is the reminder that we have turned to a new direction and we are now on a lifelong journey toward becoming like Christ. It is not the end it is the beginning.

The second quality we find at the river in Matthew is humility. John is humble by saying that he needs to be baptized by Jesus. Jesus is humble by joining the others in the baptismal waters. I like the thought that when given the choice, Jesus chooses always to be in the water with the sinners than on the banks with the self-righteous. That is the picture and it is the picture of humility.

When we come to the baptismal waters we do so with humility. We humble ourselves before God. We humble ourselves in the light of others and in the view of this world.

Dr. Wayne Stacy tells a story in his essay on baptism in *A Baptist's Theology* about speaking with a woman about her upcoming baptism. When he told her what she must do to join the church she had a look of shock and betrayal. I have to be what she said in her sophisticated tone. She had grown up Episcopalian and she had decided to take the plunge and convert to a baptist. However, when Dr. Stacy told her what she must do she balked. "You mean, I have to be dunked in a tank of water in full view of the whole church without the benefit of a shower cap or anything... you

mean before God and everyone?" "Yes," Dr. Stacy replied "that is what I am saying. The one thing we Baptists have in common is wet hair." She said "But it's so... so... inelegant." And Dr. Stacy said, "Precisely."

Humility is found at the banks of the Jordan as Jesus comes to John, and it is found in that baptismal pool as well.

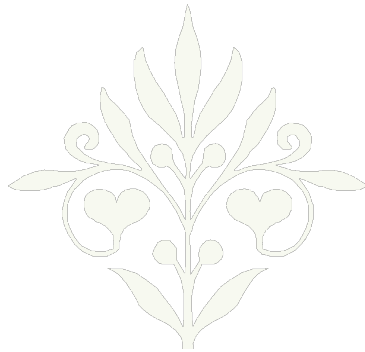
We also find obedience. When Jesus tells John why he must be baptized, Jesus says "It is so that all righteousness might be fulfilled." This is about obedience. This was a new day; it was one of those "in those days moments." This was about God creating a new people. This was about being called out; it was about repenting and following God; it was about fulfilling God's plan. For Jesus, God's plan was for him to come and leave his heavenly throne and become like you and me. For Jesus, it was time for him to accomplish all that God had sent him to do. All of this is fulfilled with total obedience.

In our baptism we are being obedient. There are many ways to look at baptism and reasons we can argue for baptism, but the basic one is that Jesus commands us to be baptized; if we are going to follow Jesus, we must be obedient. Remember, Jesus said "If you love me, you will obey my commandments."

What do we find at the river of Jordan that day that Jesus came to John? We find a call to repentance, humility, and obedience.

We find the same call at the Lord's Table this morning. Here, in this other ordinance of the church we find a call to repentance. We gather, eat the bread, drink the cup, and remember that Jesus died for our sins. It encourages us to continue to walk in the light of God's forgiveness. We find humility. We humble ourselves at this table in light of God's love and grace. We realize at this table that we are lost in our own power and we are in need

of God's power in our lives. We come to this table to continue to walk in obedience. Just as Jesus taught us to follow him in baptism, so he told us to eat this bread and drink this cup as a way of remembrance. So we come today to be obedient. We come to rediscover his love. That is what happens when we are obedient to Christ. We rediscover his forgiveness, power, and love. ✨



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