

LISTENING AND WATCHING

Baptism of Jesus – Year A: Matthew 3:13-17

My guess is that the adult baptism John was offering people in the River Jordan was something quite unusual. Matthew and the other gospel writers associate it with Jesus' ministry, but before Jesus presented himself to John, and the unique events described in today's Gospel unfolded, it appears as if John's ministry had a meaning all its own; that there was among the Hebrew people a hunger for something new, fresh, radical, and authentic that was not part of their religious experience elsewhere and that John was satisfying that hunger. We assume that John was charismatic: crowds of people were drawn to him from Jerusalem. His message was, broadly speaking, a message of reform: he called people to deepen their response to God's call through the law and the prophets. His message was prophetic, in that it seems to have criticized the way the Hebrew faith was mediated by the religious authorities: there is conflict with some Pharisees and Sadducees in which John calls them a "brood of vipers." And in fact, he himself, according to Matthew and Mark, looked like a prophet: their references to his rough clothing of camel's hair and his diet of locusts and wild honey refer to the persona of the prophets of old. And although, because we have come to know Jesus as someone very different, John was able to inspire fear in the hearts of the people by suggesting that the end of the world was a present possibility; that the man of God John expected to appear at any moment would come in judgment, casting unrepentant sinners into a purifying fire, discarded as chaff is blown away from kernels of wheat in the threshing process.

And so, this rather harsh and dramatic proclamation is the context for the baptisms John performed. The ritual itself echoed Jewish rituals of purification and initiation, but the meaning and purpose of the baptism John proclaimed was different: according to the gospels, he was calling people to turn away from unrighteousness and place the radical call of God's law at the heart and centre of their lives. His message was not inconsistent with the message Jesus would eventually preach and teach, but John's understanding of God was quite traditional. Jesus would take the traditional understanding of God to the next level, so to speak, by proclaiming what we have come to call the good news of the gospel.

And so, John's confusion when Jesus presents himself to be baptized is understandable. John recognizes Jesus as the man of God he has prophesied, and yet his first encounter with John confronts John's suppositions concerning how the righteousness of God will come into the world. When Jesus asks John to baptize him, John's world is turned upside down. The one who has all the power and authority of John's proclamation submits to John. Matthew writes, "John would have prevented [Jesus], saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus [answers] him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.'"

Two new teachings are established in this one move: the first is that Jesus is in continuity with John's prophetic ministry: Jesus' baptism by John signals that Jesus will continue what John has begun. But there is also the message of humility and servanthood that will characterize Jesus' proclamation: that the greatest is the least, that the first will be last; that the one with greater authority bows before the one with lesser authority. In this simple reversal, the notion of hierarchy is challenged, Jesus' respect for John's proclamation is acknowledged, and John is incorporated into the ministry Jesus is about to begin; John moves from being the forerunner to being a partner in Jesus' proclamation.

The events that follow are quite mystical: as he has done with countless penitents, John baptizes the One he recognizes as the fulfillment of his prophecy and ministry; as Jesus comes up from the water, the heavens are opened and the Spirit of God descends like a dove and alights on Jesus; and then there is a voice, also from heaven, saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And it is *this* baptism, more so than a baptism of repentance, that has become the pattern for Christian baptism. Without question, John's baptism and the apostle Paul's understanding of baptism inform the baptismal theology of the church, but our *adoption* as children of God and the *gift* of the Holy Spirit stand at the heart of the proclamation of Holy Baptism. God says in every baptismal washing, "You are my beloved: I love you without condition; I will love you into salvation." And then, in the cross placed upon the brow of the baptized, at one and the same time, our unity with Christ and the gift of the indwelling of

the Holy Spirit is signed: "Child of God (our new name), you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."

It is in this moment that we begin our listening and watching – *listening* for those gracious words of adoption renaming us, not merely as children of the earth, but also as beloved children of God; and then *watching* for the presence of the divine within and among us, the indwelling Spirit calling us beyond self to bring heaven close in our time and place.

Baptism is the mark of discipleship, our discipleship in Christ Jesus. And the call of our baptism is to continue listening for God's gracious words of adoption renaming us and to continue watching for God's presence within and among us as together we form Christ's church. There are other calls whose voices are loud; there are innumerable signs that this is not God's world, but Satan's. But Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea, saying "Christian, follow me."

Jesus transformed the baptism John proclaimed for us and for our salvation. May we always listen and watch for the power and presence of God in our lives; may we always follow Jesus!