

Highland Presbyterian Church
Baptism of the Lord Sunday – January 8, 2023
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

Where and when were you baptized? What is your baptism story? Who were the people who made promises and surrounded you as you grew in the faith? I'm not going to make you answer those questions out loud, but I want you to have those images in your head as we hear the word for today. It might be that your baptism story, like mine, is lived out in photographs and others' stories because you were too young to remember it. Whatever the case, we need to recognize the importance of these experiences in our lives because our stories matter.

One of the ways that we know that our stories matter is because these stories, these Biblical stories, matter. Jesus certainly knew that and frequently drew attention to that fact. Isaiah is in the Hebrew Bible, so this passage from chapter 42 that we just read is not actually written about Jesus as he was alive on earth. Some scholars think it's supposed to be about the ruler that led the Israelites out of exile. But it doesn't necessarily matter who it's supposed to be about, because when Jesus heard these words from Isaiah, he took them to heart. He shaped his ministry from the images, symbols, hopes, and visions of Scripture. Jesus knew why these stories mattered. He became who he was because of these stories. So, on the Sunday in which we remember his baptism and the beginning of his ministry, we should try to hear the words of Isaiah 42 as a guide for our lives, just Jesus heard them.

Now, the story of Jesus' baptism can be found in all four Gospels. But only Matthew's account includes this dialogue between John and Jesus, in which John initially expresses a reluctance to baptize Jesus. John argues with Jesus that it should be the other way around; that Jesus should be baptizing him, because Jesus was superior. This exchange between John and Jesus brings up a number of questions. Namely, why did Matthew even include it? One place to start examining these questions is to look at the purpose of Baptism in the culture and community and examine what it might entail.

Baptism in our tradition today is the outward sign and seal of our incorporation into the beloved family of Jesus Christ; it's the bond of unity. When we are baptized, we are made one with Christ, with one another, and with the Church of every time and place. But for John's community, a main purpose of baptism was for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. The people who came to the Jordan to be baptized by John confessed and repented of their sins, to prepare themselves to receive God's forgiveness and salvation. While on the surface this sounds like a good idea, the dynamics of honor and shame in the ancient Mediterranean world would have made this an extremely challenging thing to do.

At that time, any dignified person, especially a man, would do anything he could to amass honor and avoid shame. Therefore, coming to John for baptism and confessing one's sin in public would not bode well for one's reputation. God's approval would come at the cost

of losing face and social honor. Knowing this, we can understand John's objection to Jesus's desire to be baptized a little differently. Unlike everyone else who was coming for baptism, Jesus did not need to repent. While Matthew's account does not explicitly state Jesus' sinlessness, multiple other Bible passages do. Paul asserts that Jesus "knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21), and the author of Hebrews speaks of Jesus as "one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15).

We can see that John's protest was legitimate. But Jesus' reply was somewhat cryptic. He said, "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." In Matthew, the notion of righteousness has to do with obedience to God's law and seeking God's righteousness. The concept of righteousness, especially in the Old Testament, is not limited to moral uprightness. More importantly, righteousness is a relational concept. Human righteousness entails being put in a right relationship before God. God's righteousness, then, is expressed in covenantal faithfulness and salvation for Israel.

Baptism for John's community is a call to repentance, a preparatory step in restoring one's relationship with God, which is, to become righteous again. Jesus, therefore, was not coming for baptism for his own sins, but he came in solidarity with the sinners whom God had sent him to save. Apart from being God's eschatological agent of salvation, Jesus was at the same time the Davidic King and representative of the Jews before God. So, he humbled himself alongside his people to wait on God's mercy. Because of this mediatory role of Jesus, John finally consented to baptize him.

The text in Matthew does not explicitly describe Jesus' immersion into the Jordan, only the moment as he came up from the water. At this Trinitarian moment, God the Creator spoke through the clouds about his Son, on whom the Spirit descended in the form of a dove. What the voice from heaven says is essentially identical across the three Synoptic Gospels with one key difference. In Mark and Luke, God addressed Jesus directly, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22), whereas in Matthew, God made an announcement, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Jesus was being commissioned to his messianic task in Mark and Luke, but he was introduced to Israel in Matthew.

In Matthew, Jesus was identified with the servant of the Lord, about whom God says in Isaiah 42, "Here is my servant, ... in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him... I have called you in righteousness." Isaiah 42 can be split nicely into two separate parts. The first part describes the work of the servant, and the second part reminds the people who are hearing it of their own calling. God asks God's people to be focused on justice and upholding righteousness while at the same time looking to follow the example of the servant: in faithfulness, humility, and righteousness.

Like the people at the Jordan, we are also called to recognize Jesus's divine status and to respond to God's voice in awe and in gratitude. As those who have been baptized into the church, we are called to respond to our baptisms by working to make ourselves like Jesus. To

follow the example he spent his time on earth showing us. We are called to show the same kindness, gentleness, and humility that Jesus offers. Jesus humbled himself in solidarity when he did not need to in order to show us how to humble ourselves to receive God's mercy.

Now, I live with a four-year-old, so I am humbled about 42 times per day. This last week we traveled to my hometown in Texas and I spent some time telling my daughter all about the "glory days" of growing up there. At one point, I was telling her about how at the tennis courts there's a plaque with my name on it stating that we got 5th place out of the entire state of Texas. Her only response was, "why didn't you get 1st place?" I let her know that I sometimes lie awake at night wondering the same thing...

This type of humility, the "being knocked down a peg," is painful, it kind of bruises the ego, but it isn't exactly the type of humility that I am talking about when we look to Jesus's baptism. We are called to humble ourselves in obedience to God; to exercise the same humility that Jesus did. *This* type of humility means that we must completely let go of our egos and ourselves. When we live and work together in community, we have to take a step back and fully take ourselves out of the equation in order to figure out what's best for the entire community. Besides constantly assessing ourselves, we also have to listen to the direction of the Holy Spirit. This level of humility requires that we are in tune spiritually with the world around us and with ourselves. It takes a lot of work and a lot of intentionality.

Our individual stories matter and what we do with our lives matter. What are we going to do with our holy stories? Even though it is tremendously difficult, the closer that we get to the spiritual practice of humility, the closer the entire community gets to the Kingdom of God as it is intended. So, may we all work to make it so. Amen.