

1-12-20

Baptism of Our Lord

Matthew 3:13-17

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Ever watch that show Undercover Boss? The CEO of the big multi-million-dollar company takes on a disguise and steps into an entry level job in their own company to see what life is really like. Sometimes it's making sandwiches or washing dishes and they usually end up getting reamed out or fired by some overzealous middle manager.

Today we have an episode of Undercover Boss for the ages. It takes place at a river in Israel. Who's the undercover boss? No, not the CEO of Subway or 7-Eleven. Today, "we stand and we watch at the bank wide eyed" (Christ Begins) as the one in charge of everything there is steps in. Christ Steps In 1) [in]to a river, 2) [in]to our place, and 3) [in]to his office as Savior.

So let's set the scene. We are told, "**Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John**" (Matthew 3:13). John the Baptist was out at this river calling people to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Remember Jesus and John are cousins and the last time we heard about them together in the Bible is when their two mothers come together. As Mary comes near bearing Jesus in her womb, Elizabeth can feel her baby, John, leap inside her womb. We don't know what kind of contact they had in the meantime, but now it's 30 years later. Now Jesus comes to John to be baptized.

We have a number of things to help picture the scene today. This is the Jordan River today, possibly at or near the site where John was baptizing. [Picture] Not much to look is it? (In all likelihood, the river would have been much bigger, but so much water is taken out of the Jordan to use for the whole country that it shrinks down to just a stream. In the north, near the headwaters, it's rushing and clear, more like you'd expect.) Sometimes we think as if the Bible happened in Never-never land, but this is not fake "reality-tv". This is a real river with real water and **Jesus really stepped into it** to be baptized by John.

Right out in front today is our baptismal font with this very scene on it and the same shown on our screens. In the font, there's even water brought back from the Jordan. (Here you see my sister filling up some of the clear stuff from the North).

Now here's a question to consider. Why in all the world would the Son of God come to be baptized? John was baptizing to wash away sin, and Jesus didn't have any. Baptism gives the forgiveness of sins and he didn't need any. So what is Jesus doing there? This is exactly John's confusion and why "**John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'**" (Matthew 3:14). It's hard for us to comprehend the true magnitude of this exchange. It'd be like Aaron Rodgers asking you to teach him how to throw, or Tiger Woods coming to you for putting lessons, except that times infinity.

John recognizes the "lesser to the greater" exchange he's taking part in. There is no reason why the Messiah should be coming to a sinner like himself to be baptized. So John tries to turn the tables, I'm the sinner! I'm the one who needs you to baptize me!" But Jesus gives him the reason why he's there and why John needs to do this. Jesus replies, "**Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness**" (Matthew 3:15). He's saying, "John ordinarily you'd be right, but in this case, allow it because we are carrying out something very important—**all righteousness** in fact!"

So what does he mean by "all righteousness"? When we hear the word righteousness, we probably tend to think most naturally of the righteousness of God as him being holy and just. Or in our context, knowing everything that the Apostle Paul tells us about righteousness in his letters, we might think of righteousness being what God gives to us, the holiness we receive, like a robe of righteousness, and that's certainly true.

In the Old Testament context, sometime the term "righteousness" sometimes brought to mind a slightly different picture--**God's saving activity**, like when he redeemed his people from slavery and brought them out of Egypt. His righteousness is connected with his saving his people. In Psalm 65:5 David praises God saying, "**You answer us with awesome deeds of righteousness, O God our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth.**" We see God connect the two when he says through Isaiah, "**There is no God apart from me, a righteous God and Savior, there is none but me.**" His

righteousness and saving are connected. We even see them used basically as synonyms in Isaiah 46:13. **“I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed.”**

So now, back to the question of what “righteousness” Jesus is talking about fulfilling. He’s is talking about accomplishing God’s plan of saving activity on our behalf. God had enacted a plan long ago and this was one of the pieces of that plan which needed to be fulfilled. The Son of God, in charge of the whole world, had already gone undercover, being born in a stable and placed in a manger with animals around. He had already become one of us, taking the most entry level position in his own universe. Now at his baptism, he was **publicly stepping into our place** and identifying himself as our substitute. He didn’t have any sin of his own, but he was stepping into our identity as a sinner. He didn’t need baptism for himself, but he did because we need it.

So as requested, “Then John consented,” and Jesus was baptized by him with the same water baptism that you receive. Now think about what that means for you. Every time you step outside the lines and disobey God’s commands, **Christ steps in**. Every time you see the good that you would and don’t do it, **Christ steps in** and does it for you. Every time you deserved to be punished with the full extent of God wrath, **Christ stepped in** one time for all time and bore in his body every last blow that you deserve. And now, every time you mosey on in to stand before God covered in the filth of another day gone by, **Christ steps in** front of you, displaying his life as if it was yours.

This is Jesus stepping into fulfill all righteousness, carrying out God’s saving plan by living a life of perfect righteousness, so that when the Father looks at you, he does indeed see you clothed in righteousness, not your own, but that of the one who stepped into your place. All of this takes place without a word of how the actual baptism takes place. John consented and the next thing we hear is, **“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water”** (Matthew 3:16).

That’s when the big reveal comes! See up to now, John and anybody else that may have been around, probably weren’t grasping the theological gravity of what was really happening. But this was a huge moment in the history of the world. Jesus had just **publicly stepped into our place and into his office as Savior and Servant**. This couldn’t go unnoticed. Isaiah had prophesied 700 years before about the Servant who would take this office. **“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him”** (Isaiah 42:1).

So immediately after Jesus is baptized, as he comes up out of the water, what happens? **“At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”**

People are always asking for a sign from God! There couldn’t be a clearer sign for us in all the world. The undercover Son of God is revealed! A voice from heaven points him out and the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove! Coincidentally, at the baptismal site in Israel, there were doves walking around, but the form of the dove used by the Holy Spirit on that day delivered a very special message! Here he is—the one whom God had promised and his people were expecting all along—the “Messiah.” The Hebrew title “Messiah” means the “Anointed One.”

In the Old Testament, when a king took office, he was anointed for that office. So take King David for instance. **“[The prophet] Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power”** (1 Samuel 16:13).

So what just happened with Jesus? The Apostle Peter tells us exactly what happened, **“You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power...”** (Acts 10:38). The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus to anoint him with power for his mission as Savior. The Messiah was taking his public office! We spent this last advent looking for the coming of the Promised Prophet, the Perfect Priest, and the Conquering King, and now we can look with certainty on the one the Holy Spirit lands on and say, “Here’s my Prophet my Priest, My King, here’s my Savior, my God, my King.” (Christ Begins, Luke Thomson). Here is Christ beginning his mission and ministry as Savior!

His baptism in the Jordan was only the beginning. After this, he would go out into the wilderness to overcome the devil and all of his temptations. After this, he would travel around “breaking the darkness with his liberating light as Savior, preaching the gospel, healing every dread disease.” (CW 353).

His baptism in the Jordan is where Christ steps in and begins his journey of saving righteousness, a journey that would take him to another baptism. This was a much different kind of baptism, a baptism into death on the cross. At his baptism in the Jordan, the Father says, “This is my beloved Son, with him I am well-pleased,” and at this second baptism, the Father turns his face away and forsakes that beloved Son. Remember who hangs there on the cross, not you, but same Son who stepped into your place at his baptism. This is the best part! Through your baptism in his name, you get to stand in his place at the end of the age as the Father looks at you and says, “This is my child, whom I love; I am well-pleased with you!” Amen.

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. Galatians 3:27  
Amen.

*(Special thanks to Luke Thomson’s song “Christ Begins,” from which many thoughts were used for this sermon and series.)*