

“Baptizing Jesus”
Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43;
Matthew 3:13-17

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What a scene it is—the image of Jesus coming up out of the water and being greeted by the Spirit, and God’s words coming down. It’s an incredible scene. It starts out with John asking Jesus, “Why are you doing this?” I’ve always wondered the same thing. Why does Jesus have to be baptized? What’s this all about? It’s an incredible introduction to who Jesus is, but why does he need this baptism? After all, John’s baptism has been about repentance. The idea is that you are turning from your sin and turning toward God.

You might say that Jesus is making a turn. All we really know is that he’s been a carpenter or some kind of laborer, probably building houses or some such thing. And now as he comes to John, he’s making a turn—a turn into his mission and ministry. He gets this incredible vision. If I had that kind of vision, life could be over. It’s fantastic. I would love to hear God call me his beloved son with whom he is well pleased. What more would you need? But this isn’t the end. This is just the beginning for Jesus.

In some ways, this baptism is inviting us into the same thing, the beginning of what Jesus is doing. What is it he’s supposed to be doing? We hear these words from Isaiah: “the one in whom my soul delights,” and that’s what God says in Matthew: “my beloved son with whom I’m well pleased.” “I put my Spirit upon him” (Isaiah), and the dove comes down (in Matthew). So that’s one reason we look back at this passage from Isaiah. It seems to fit. So, what will he bring forth? Justice to the nations.

Justice is always that big word that we can look at and say, “We need justice.” But what is it? It is the ability to distinguish what is good and bad, isn’t it? It’s the way we determine or decide what’s good and needs to happen, or what’s bad. Another way to look at it is what’s life-giving or death-dealing. It’s the ability to make that judgement and use it.

It goes on to say that he’s also going to be a covenant to the people, a light to the nations. He will bring people out of the dungeon and out of the prisons in darkness. To be a covenant means that God wants to engage. It’s an agreement between peoples. It’s almost a way of saying we will be friends; we will be in relationship, and we’re going to commit to that. He’s coming again to enable that to happen with us and for us. In doing so, there’s also this image of bringing us into the light, taking us out of the prison, out of the places that deal death in our lives and into that which brings life into our lives.

Peter also suggests that he’s announcing good news. It’s translated “the good news is being *preached*,” but my sense is that the word that’s used really means to *announce* good news. Maybe preaching is supposed to be announcing good news, but it doesn’t always feel that way these days. We don’t always use the word “preaching” as if it’s

giving us good news. But that's what this is here. It's announcing good news. What's the good news? The good news of peace through Jesus Christ.

I think it's kind of the same thing Isaiah is saying: peace is that way of life that happens when we go the good direction, when we are doing that which is life-giving rather than death-dealing, and is a good way of going. He goes on to say that Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead. Sometimes it feels like we use that in a way to make Jesus seem like a judge. Perhaps you can translate that as he can judge people who are alive or people who are dead and the idea is that he knows how to judge what's good and what's right, and what's wrong. You can also translate that as Jesus judges the good and the dead. That is, he's able to tell the difference. That may be important to us.

This baptism is something that Jesus is doing. He gets in the water and comes out and for him, it's a new beginning. God has come and is doing something. What comes out of that baptism for us? I think just as Jesus has chosen to enter in to do his ministry and mission, God has affirmed that through this baptism. In some ways it's a way of introducing that ministry. What it does, then, is offer us that same question he offers his disciples: Will you follow me? Will you baptize me into your lives? We allow this to be an initiation of a way in which God comes to you, to us, to me. Can I begin to see that there is a way of entering into the good news, that there's an announcement of good news that through Christ there's a way into peace, into living in what gives us life, not death?

That's pretty good stuff. If I could just always make sure that was always what I paid attention to, but I know myself. There was one time when I was hiking up in the Colorado Rockies. I had a good topographical map, and I was at a stream crossing. I could see on the map where the trail went. But I also saw that after a while, further down the valley, it crossed back over the stream. I didn't want to have to take off my pack and take my shoes off and walk across the stream, and do it all over again. So, I thought, "I can read a map. It looks like I could go down this other way and it would be just as easy." Instead of crossing the stream, I took off through the woods. Well, I spent the next two to four hours going across dead-falls and around trees, trying to find a way through the woods to get down the valley. It feels like there are a lot of times in my life when there is something presented to me as a great way to go, and I think I know better.

There are two things I needed when I was at that stream crossing. I needed the right map, and I needed to trust it. This baptism of Jesus is the beginning opportunity to say, "Here's the right map. Here's the one to trust, the one to truly speak into my life the things that make for life and not death." For when Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead, or the judge of life and of death, he knows the difference. He knows what's right and what's good, what gives life and what doesn't. I have the opportunity to listen.

I don't know if any of you have gone to see the Mr. Rogers film, but in one of the scenes, this crusty news reporter asks Mr. Rogers' wife, "Is he really like this? Is that

who he is? Is he always so nice? Does he always seem to care?" She said something like, "That's not who he is; that's who he is becoming. It's his practice. He's made it his practice."

I was thinking about that scene in relation to the baptism of Jesus. As we have the opportunity to baptize Jesus into our lives, part of that is to baptize ourselves into a practice of following him—following him in a way that changes what we do on a daily basis, perhaps in every interaction. I think I'm a long way from that, but I see it as something I want to try, to practice following Jesus. There are a lot of other elements of life that invited me to follow them. To tell you the truth, some of those that I've tried have not really given me the life I was looking for, but I believe as I follow Jesus, I have not been disappointed. The grace, the goodness, the hope, the joy, the love, I meet in Jesus and in following him.

As I follow him, he invites me into things that are life-giving. One of those things is to recognize that we're not just individuals off on our own. So much of society tells us that. But the practice of doing good, the practice of being one who follows Jesus, invites us to recognize that part of that practice is being together. In fact, he invites us to be together in fellowship around a meal. He instituted a practice that engages us in that way to remind us that we are community, in communion with one another, each practicing the gift that Jesus gives us, the direction he shows us, leading us to what is life-giving and not death-dealing.

We are invited to baptize him into our lives and to join him at the table. Amen.