

The Baptism of our Lord
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish,
Saint Francisville, LA
8 January 2017

Matthew 3:13-17

After taking some time off for the Christmas break, it is appropriate that I start this sermon with a joke. “A priest and a taxi driver both died and went to heaven. St. Peter was at the Pearly gates waiting for them. 'Come with me,' said St. Peter to the taxi driver. The taxi driver did as he was told and followed St Peter to a mansion. It had everything you could imagine from a bowling alley to an Olympic size pool. 'Oh my word, thank you,' said the taxi driver. Next, St. Peter led the priest to a rough old shack with a bunk bed and a little old television set. 'Wait, I think you are a little mixed up,' said the priest. 'Shouldn't I be the one who gets the mansion? After all I was a priest, went to church every day, and preached God's word.' 'Yes, that's true.' St Peter rejoined, ' But during your sermons people slept. When the taxi driver drove, everyone prayed.'” (<http://www.guy-sports.com>, Clean Christian Jokes)

I hope I don't put you to sleep this morning. In the first three chapters of the Gospel of Matthew we hear three different voices announcing or giving testimony about Jesus of Nazareth. The first voice we hear clearly is the voice of the Prophets, as the angel tells Joseph that the child Mary is carrying is God's own son, “to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" —which means, "God with us.” Matthew then tells us about another voice announcing the coming of our Messiah, a voice of one crying, “prepare the way for the Lord”. John the Baptizer announces, "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” (3:11). In today's reading we see God himself coming down in the form of a dove, as his great voice breaks in: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

Today we hear how Jesus chose to be baptized by John, a curious act in itself. In a Mediterranean culture with a heavy emphasis on honor and shame, Jesus shows great humility to accept baptism from someone of lower rank than himself. John himself is aware of this and expresses reservations at first. He says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus, however, chose to proceed with the baptism, although this was absolutely unnecessary because John was performing a baptism of repentance and Jesus had nothing to repent about. He was born without sin, and had committed no sin. He was in no need of repentance and forgiveness. So, why do it?

Once again the answer is “Great love”. Jesus tells John, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Another way to translate this phrase can be, “Let it be done this way for now. For in this way we shall do all that God requires”. This is of utmost importance to Jesus. But, what exactly did God require of his Son?

In Hebrew, the expression “Righteousness of God” is a legal term used in covenantal relationships and treaties. When we do what God expects from us we show human righteousness. When God accomplishes his part of the bargain, we speak of the Righteousness of God. So, Jesus chooses to be baptized in order to fulfill all righteousness, both Divine and human. By accepting baptism he humbles himself to the status of men and acts on behalf of his people. On the other hand, as the Divine Word that existed before the creation of the world, by accepting baptism Jesus also fulfills the divine promise that the Messiah will be “God among us” and “God for us.” When Jesus states that he is fulfilling “All” righteousness he is thinking of his future cross, and he is thinking of Baptism as the beginning of this journey. A journey that would involve great sacrifice and pain, and would ultimately take him to the cross. So, Jesus is in fact telling John: “I need to embark on this rescue mission on behalf of all humanity. I am here to deliver God’s righteousness. This is my part of the covenant deal and I am here to fulfill the covenant. I am ready to accept the pain and suffering that this mission will entail. I am ready to take the place of all sinners of all generations. The baptism of repentance I will take on their behalf, is the beginning of my mission and journey.”

In Latin America, parents and grandparents bless their children as they are about to embark in a long journey. They place a hand on the person’s head or shoulder and commend them to God, asking God to protect them in their journey. We see this same gesture in God after Jesus’ baptism and humble acceptance of his mission. God commissions and blesses him for the mission ahead as the skies open, a dove appears, and a deep voice says, “This is my Son, the beloved in whom I am well pleased”. Jesus’ baptism served as an act of commissioning for ministry. Having accepted this journey, Jesus chooses Baptism as his starting point. My brothers and sisters, I believe it is the same with us. We too have been baptized. Through our baptism in Jesus Christ we too have been forgiven and restored. Through baptism we have been commissioned and made ready to “go”, to start our own journey, to be on our way. We have a pattern to follow in the love and obedience of our Lord. But we can not pretend that this will be a pain-free or a conflict free journey. We too have to contend with shadows of the Cross at all steps of the journey. We too can expect suffering and anguish.

That Jesus’ baptism ceremony points to the cross is validated by the other episode when the voice of God is heard with almost verbatim words: Jesus is at the mountain of transfiguration with two of his disciples, talking with Elijah and

Moses and staring into the horizon in the direction of Jerusalem. His heart was heavy and he was filled with anxiety as he knew that the cross was approaching. He knows his death awaits him and yet he also knows he has no choice but to go there. After years of preaching and teaching, Jesus realizes that he must go to Jerusalem and be killed. Suddenly the skies open and the voice is heard, "This is my Son, my beloved one... Listen to him". This is a reassuring sign for us. Not only was God there at the commissioning of Christ's ministry, but he was also there at times when things were rough, when his heart was filled with dread, and when the journey was met with bumps on the road. At all difficult times, God showed up and comforted his Son, giving him shadows of the cross, but also giving him the strength that he needed to continue the course set before him.

We know because of the faithfulness of our God that he too shows up in our lives at times of extreme distress, at times when we feel terrified by the task ahead, and at times when we feel abandoned by the world. There are times when we say, "Dear God, I can't possibly forgive my husband. He has offended me so much!" And God replies, "You too are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased". We say, "Dear Lord, my heart is filled with sadness. I go from funeral to funeral saying good-bye to friends I grew up with and my heart is filled with loss. I don't know how much I can take". And God, says, "You too are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." We say, "Dear Lord, I am filled with nostalgia over the Church of my childhood and I am so angry at what has happened with our Church in the last few years. Sometimes I feel like leaving the Church altogether. I am so angry that I don't know if I can go on". And God says, "This is my Church and I will take care of it. Just remember, you are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased". Regardless of what our mission is God continues to show up. God is always there for us. He will never leave us, nor will he ever forget us. So, knowing this my friends, I invite all of you to continue in your journey of faith. I invite you to fulfill the mission God has given each of you for your lives. God is with you and he will never abandon you. May he continue to bless you, Amen!