

Sermon for Sunday, January 8, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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This time of year
it's almost as if
we have biblical whiplash.
Just two weeks ago
it was Christmas, and we were celebrating Christ's birth.
Last Sunday
was the Feast of the Holy Name,
marking the naming and circumcision of the baby Jesus.
Two days ago was the Feast of the Epiphany, when the wise men
came to visit the baby.
And suddenly today
he is at the Jordan River,
and all grown up -
Where did the years go?

The only mention Matthew makes
of those in-between years
is in telling the story
of Herod's fury and fear
that led Joseph - warned in a dream -
to take Mary and the baby
and live as refugees in Egypt
until Hero was dead
and it was safe for the baby and his family
to return.

Apart from that, Jesus' childhood
seems have been very ordinary,
the only thing important enough
to have made it into the gospels
the story of him getting lost
on a visit to the temple in Jerusalem
when he was twelve years old,
and even that
Matthew didn't think was important enough
to be included in his gospel.

And now Jesus is an adult - according to Luke, who seems to be interested in such details,
he is about 30 years old
when he begins his public ministry -
Jesus is an adult
and something prompts him
to leave his home, presumably in Nazareth
where the family moved
when he was
his business - whatever he's been doing for his livelihood
all these years -
and to head south along the Jordan Valley
to the place where his relative John
is proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come.

He's not the only one.
The people have been flocking to John.
Some of them have come ready to listen,
ready to respond,
confessing their sins,
and being baptized in the river.
But not all of them.
Some of them, it seems,
have simply come to gawk at this strange man
dressed in rough camel hair clothing
eating only what he could forage,
some perhaps even come
to see if they can catch him out
preaching heresy.
Just as they would later do
to Jesus.
And I suspect
that it's from John
that Jesus gets that lovely turn of phrase that he too
directs and insincere
religious leaders:
"You brood of vipers."

But then comes Jesus,

and the contrast
could not be greater.
Jesus comes
not as a spectator
a judge
come to see
if John passes
the religious test,
no, Jesus comes
to listen
to respond
to confess
to be baptized.

But John
knows him, John recognizes him.
And whatever Jesus has been doing
these last
thirty years,
whatever he has been doing
is enough for John to know
the this is the one person
who doesn't need
to listen to him,
doesn't need to respond,
doesn't need to confess,
doesn't need to be baptized.

John recognizes Jesus
for who he is,
God's own son,
Emmanuel,
God with us.

And thinks that if anyone
is to be doing the baptizing
it should be Jesus,
and he would rather
be baptized by him.

But no, Jesus says,
“I need to be baptized by you.”
Not
because he needs to be forgiven his sins.
But because he needs
to be seen
as following the tradition,
he needs
to be seen
as belonging to something
that John has already begun,
he needs
to be part of the whole biblical tradition of prophets
calling the people
to come back
to God.
Not for his own sake,
but for the sake of those
whom he will call
to follow him.

Jesus is part of the plan
that God has been at work on
ever since the time of creation.

That’s why
it’s not surprising
that there’s water involved.
Because that’s how it all begins.
In the beginning
when God created the heavens and the earth,
the earth was formless and void,
and darkness covered
the face of the deep,
and a wind, the spirit of God
passed over the waters,
and God spoke,
and it was the beginning
of all creation,
the beginning

of all life.

We heard it in the psalm, didn't we, the voice of the Lord
sounding over the waters.

And now it's happening again.
Jesus walks into the river,
and John pushes him under,
and as he comes back up
out of the water,
the wind, the spirit
of God
comes over the waters
and over him,
and the voice of God sounds,
and it's creation
all over again.

It's no wonder
that when the apostle Paul
talks about what Jesus brings,
he uses the language
of new creation,
new life.

But back to Jesus.
Because where it's different
from the first creation
is in what the voice of God says,
"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."
And it's like Christmas
all over again.
Instead of Jerusalem
where you might expect
the birth of a newborn king,
he was born
in the little town of Bethlehem.

And here, instead of the temple,
where you'd expect to find God,

here on the banks of the river Jordan
comes the announcement of God's own son
come among us.

Here it is,
the great proclamation
that makes the beginning
of Jesus' public ministry,
and it's down in the valley
among the reed beds and mud
with a crazy preacher.

God chooses
strange ways
of making himself known, doesn't he?
He just doesn't do
what we expect.

And its still the same today.
Because what began that day
was the church.
It was the beginning
of Jesus going
and calling people
to follow him,
a pattern that continued
through his life
and death and resurrection,
calling,
always calling
us to follow him.

Why?
Because he's God's son,
and God is pleased with him.
And when we follow him
in baptism
and in faith,
we become integrally connected with him,
lumped in with him,
and God is pleased with us too.

You know, one of the interesting things about the story of Jesus
is that he didn't actually
baptize anyone himself.

I think because

when he was still alive

all you had to do to be connected with God through Jesus,
was to follow him.

But when Jesus was raised, and wasn't going to be physically with us any more,
that was when he told his disciples

to baptize people

in his name,

so that we too

could be joined with him.

And like it was for Jesus,

baptism

is the beginning for us too,

the beginning of our life of faith.

Sometimes

we think of baptism

as something that belongs just

to the first years of life,

as we baptize our babies

in the name of the Father and the Son and the only Spirit,

and they become part of the church.

But that's not all there is to it.

Because baptism

is when we are joined with Christ;

it's the beginning

of the journey of faith.

But just the beginning.

And it doesn't end with confirmation.

Confirmation

is when we take on the promises of baptism

for ourselves,

when we recommit ourselves

to the journey

of faith.

And just as baptism
marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry
so to it marks
the beginning of ours,
as we live out Christ's commands
to love God with all of our being
and love our neighbors as ourselves
and to make disciples,
sharing the good news of God in Christ
with those around us.
All of us like Christ commissioned
to be ministers
of the gospel.