

**“Marked for a Purpose”**

**Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17**

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**Baptism of the Lord/January 8, 2023**

To begin, I'd like to wish you all a happy and blessed *Timkat* season. *Timkat*, I should explain, is an important festival of the 40-million-strong Orthodox Church of Ethiopia. By common consent, it is one of the world's most spectacular religious festivals. A three-day celebration literally brings large areas of the country to a halt in a season dedicated to elaborate rituals, to feasting and gift giving, pageantry and mysticism. In vast pilgrimages and processions, individual churches parade their *tabots*—symbols of *the Ark of the Covenant*.

*But what are Ethiopians celebrating so passionately?* Timkat comes 12 days after Christmas, which in the local calendar means that it falls on January 17 through 19. Tourist guidebooks vaguely relate it to Epiphany. Actually, the event commemorates *the baptism of Christ in the Jordan* (Timkat is the Amharic word for baptism). Baptismal symbolism dominates the rituals to the point that enthusiastic believers *plunge* into consecrated pools to renew their vows. The baptismal theme recalls some very early debates in the Christian church, controversies that were raging not long after apostolic times. Timkat is, in fact, a startling *relic* of ancient Christian beliefs.

You see, *in the first three Christian centuries*, believers had very different ideas about *the divinity of Christ* and whether there was a particular moment at which he gained that status. Yes, Christ came into the world—but when exactly did that divinity shine forth?

The mainstream church believed, of course, that the baby born in Bethlehem was God incarnate, but powerful voices held *rival views*. For many

early Christians, Jesus was a good or holy man, conceived and born in the usual way, and only at the moment of *his baptism* was he suddenly overwhelmed by *the power of divinity, the Logos or Holy Spirit*.

That understanding easily arises if one reads just the Gospels of Mark and John, *without considering the birth stories of Matthew and Luke*. Both Mark and John begin their narratives with the story of John the Baptist, followed by Jesus' baptism, when *some extraordinary power* seems to descend on him. At that point, Jesus flees into the wilderness, *presumably* to confront the astonishing new reality he has encountered.

Yet the mainstream church never forgot its ancient fascination with Christ's baptism. We know, for example, that late in the second century that the church in Alexandria, Egypt, *had a special veneration for Jesus' baptism*, which they celebrated on January 6. This was the date at which God became *manifest* (to use the Greek word, it was the time of *epiphany*). The mainstream church appropriated the festival easily enough.

The baptism theme, of course, does not fit logically with the standard *Christmas story* that we know—most obviously, some 30 years separated birth and baptism—but such considerations did not prevent Egyptians from accommodating what might otherwise be seen as two irreconcilable views of Christ's appearance.

But whatever the church's official theology, Timkat recalls *a very old* interpretation of Christ's baptism and its significance.<sup>1</sup>

I share this with you *to highlight the fact* that Jesus's baptism—and ours—is *important*.

There are, you see, important reasons why *Jesus' baptism* was observed as one of *three feasts of light*, which include *Epiphany*, marking the wise men's recognition of the true nature of the Christ child, and *the wedding feast at Cana*, at which Jesus performed his first miracle. These are *feasts*

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip Jenkins, *The Three Days of Timkat*, The Christian Century, December 26, 2011

*of light* because they illuminate God's nature. They are three occasions on which God chose to reveal an aspect of *God made flesh*, as incarnated in Jesus Christ. And they indicate that *the incarnation* is not only about Jesus **but about us**: these three feasts demonstrate to Christians not only what God is like *but also who God wishes us to be*.

Baptism, then, is about celebrating the incomparable gift we receive as creatures beloved of God. *But baptism is also about more fully engaging the responsibility that this identity entails*. The baptism of Jesus initiated his public ministry, which led him to the cross. For individual Christians, baptism is our call to the community of the church, which often provides us with crosses of our own to bear.

Yet it is together, as church, that we are meant to witness to *peace* in a cruel and violent world and bring a message of *hope* in the face of despair. Whatever the worldly powers may be—Roman rulers or contemporary dictators, corrupt lobbyists, arms traders and war profiteers—*Christians are called to witness to another, greater power*. Our baptisms *mark us for this purpose*.<sup>2</sup>

Think of it this way:

Recall that *three things* happen in the story of Jesus's baptism. The *heavens* are torn open, the *Spirit* descends like a dove, and a *voice* says, "*This is my beloved child*." Each of these events has great significance.

For instance, the beginning of the story is about *tearing* and it goes like this: *heaven is open to you*. Look at what happens in the story of Jesus: the gospel begins with the tearing of the heavens and ends with the tearing of the temple curtain—*metaphors* that indicate that the *veil* between you and God has been torn apart. **God's kingdom is open to you**. There is no limit to God's purpose for your life: it is an eternal purpose.

The second line of the story is about *the dove*: **God's Spirit is in you**. Remember the end of the flood, *when the dove brought the twig of new life*

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Marked For a Purpose*, The Christian Century, December 25, 2007

*back to Noah?* Well, here is the dove descending on Jesus, bringing the gift of the Holy Spirit. You are now the temple of God's Holy Spirit. You are the place where others will encounter God. *God's Spirit is in you.*

The third line of the story of baptism is about *the beloved: you mean everything to God.* God's words are, "*This is my beloved Son.*" These words mean that Jesus means everything to God, and everything God gives to Jesus *he gives to us. You mean everything to God.*

And so, heaven is *open* to you; God's Spirit is *in* you; *you* are everything to God.<sup>3</sup>

There is, however, an *important dimension* to baptism that many North American Christians may not be aware of, namely, *the profound political and religious significance of Jesus' baptism by John.* Through baptism, Jesus declares his readiness for the (political and religious) *revolution* represented by the *kingdom of God.*

You see, in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), *only Matthew* presents this curious dialogue between Jesus and John prior to the baptism. Recall that Jesus is eager to submit to John's baptism, but John resists. Recognizing Jesus' superiority, John urges a role reversal, protesting that Jesus should baptize him. After some coaxing, John eventually relents and baptizes Jesus.

Many New Testament scholars contend that Matthew uses this dialogue to address a "*messianic embarrassment*" troubling some followers of Jesus. Certain persons may have asked, "*Why would Jesus, a sinless messiah, submit to John's baptism, which was for the repentance of sins?*"

Jesus submits not because of any need to repent of sin but rather to "*fulfill all righteousness.*" The word "*righteousness*" carries numerous connotations. For many Christians, the word evokes thoughts of *personal piety* and the state of one's "*soul*" or "*conscience*" before God. Yet the

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<sup>3</sup> Sam Wells, *Holiness: Baptism*, The Christian Century, March 1, 2000

Christian tradition has emphasized the *personal* aspect of righteousness to the *exclusion* of another important feature.

Righteousness also signifies *God's saving action in the world*. One might even translate the Greek word for righteousness (*dikaiosun*) as "*justice*." According to Thomas Long, *righteousness encapsulates God's passionate commitment to set right the things that are wrong*.

Thus Jesus' submission to John's baptism is no simple act of personal piety. *On the contrary*, Jesus discerns that John's baptism and fiery preaching constitute *a revolutionary declaration about a new world order* where God will set right all that the establishment (in Jerusalem and Rome) has put awry. Jesus says, "*Through this baptism, I 'declare my solidarity' with you, John, and join this revolution whereby God's justice will be manifest in the world.*" By submitting to John's baptism, Jesus declares, "*I am ready for the revolution!*"

Other textual clues indicate the political and religious radicalism of John and Jesus. John's baptismal activity occurs in the wilderness. In the first century C.E., the word "wilderness" held a subversive significance. In social protest movements around Judea, agitators led their followers into the wilderness. Thus, John's choice of the wilderness and Jesus' willingness to join him there carried a subversive symbolism, especially given the popularity of John's movement. People joined through repentance and baptism and declared that God's true power would emerge on the margins of the society.

Still another indicator of the revolutionary commitment of John and Jesus is the centrality of repentance in their proclamation. Excessive, sentimental use has blunted the sharp edge of the word "repentance," which involves more than an admission of wrong. The Greek word *metanoia* connotes a change of mind-set. To repent is to adopt a new mind-set that causes one to turn around. It is an apocalyptic act, creating a new way of envisioning and thinking about the world. Only those with new mind-sets will be fit for the new kingdom.

If, for example, Jesus had simply been a great moral teacher, a gentle rabbi who did nothing more than urge his devoted followers to love God . . . he would scarcely have been seen as a threat to the social order. . . . John the Baptist was imprisoned and executed because of his preaching. . . . Jesus was to fare no better.<sup>4</sup>

All of this points to the fact that we have been *marked* in baptism for greater purposes than we may have imagined. Baptism's import, you see, is so much *larger* than Christians generally acknowledge when they say, "*I was baptized a Catholic, or an Episcopalian, or a Methodist, or a Presbyterian.*" A Christian is baptized *into* the Christian faith, and *not* a particular denomination. Baptism is that *big*. Today's reading from Isaiah offers us a glimpse of something bigger still: *a God who is not limited by our understanding of baptism and what it signifies—a God who created humanity in the divine image and whose love for us is so great that it embraces all people, no exceptions.* This God is beyond our understanding and our comfort zones.

I'll leave you with this thought: Walter Brueggemann called Matthew 3 a "*thick text*," one that is *dense* with our history as a people of faith. Brueggemann pointed out that in this story *Jesus reenacts the whole history of Israel*. It is at the Jordan that Moses interprets the Torah, that Israel enters a land of freedom apart from "*Pharaoh's production schemes*," and that Elisha receives Elijah's spirit. When Jesus approaches John on the banks of the Jordan River all of this collective memory is put into play. And all of it will be recapitulated in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of the Son of God. The occasion of his baptism is *so momentous* that we are *jolted* all the way back to the first chapter of Genesis, as the separation of earth and sky that God established at creation is refigured. God breaks through in order to speak directly to human beings.

Brueggemann insisted that all of these memories and meanings are right there in the story. It is up to *us* to retrieve them and make them known,

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<sup>4</sup> Brad R. Braxton, *Ready for the Revolution*, The Christian Century, January 2, 2002

reaching not only back into the Hebrew scriptures but looking ahead to the early church. *The baptism of Jesus is the event that allows the story to go forward into the community of those who follow him and become his disciples, those who will be known as Christians. Those who will set things right. It is that big.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Marked For a Purpose*, The Christian Century, December 25, 2007

