

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

The Baptism of Our Lord
Matthew 3:13-17

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“Baptism, Love, and a Whole New Life”

Should he or shouldn't he?

It would be a strange thing to do, certainly not a part of his tradition,
and he had no idea what others would think of him for doing it.

He could lose all credibility – with his own people, not to mention his colleagues.

He was a rabbi for goodness sake!

And not only a rabbi but a “super rabbi”, a rabbi who trained other rabbis.

He had grown up in a devout Jewish home,

And he had felt called to be a rabbi for as long as he could remember.

In school the teachers were always on the lookout for the brightest and best students,
and he had certainly been the brightest and best, not only in his class, but in the school.

To become a rabbi you had to memorize the entire Torah,

so that's what they encouraged him to do.

He had begun at age 7 and by just age 9 1/2 –

at least 2 years earlier than anyone else anyone could remember –

he had completed the task.

Once you have done that,

there was simply a time of apprenticeship and then you could be a rabbi.

Because of his phenomenal gift of memory, however, he had been encouraged to go on to become a
super rabbi – a rabbinical scholar – and for that, one had to memorize all of scripture.

And so by the time he was 12, he had memorized Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the book of Psalms.

He still remembered that time in Jerusalem when all of the rabbinical scholars in the temple
had gathered around him, asking him not only to quote obscure verses,

but asking for his interpretation,

and then being astounded at the depth of his understanding.

He had been in his element and he had felt so grown-up, so professional, so proud –

until his parents had shown up & his father had come in

& dragged him out like a child in front of everyone. It had been so humiliating!

He had gone on to memorize all of the books of scripture,

completing the task by the time he was a mere 20 years old.

And by the time he had done that, scripture for him was not just something written on scrolls,

but something written in his mind and on his heart and along every fiber of his being.

He knew he was an incredible preacher and phenomenal teacher.

He was often asked to preach or teach in synagogues all around the country.

And yet somehow he wasn't succeeding in his own congregation.

He had started out okay, but over the years the numbers went down

and now he only got 10 – 20 people at most – on any given Sabbath.

He joked that he had a congregation of 2-1/2 people.

Well, you did have to have 10 to have service,

but there have been some days when they didn't have the 10 required.

His ministry with struggling. Let's face it – it was failing, and he wasn't sure why.

He knew he was destined to be more
than the rabbi of this small struggling congregation in an obscure village.
His mother had told him repeatedly that God had something special in mind for him.
His father had been quieter on the subject but had always concurred with his mother.
And there had been teachers and colleagues and friends along the way
who had told him similar things.

One of his rabbi friends (who was almost as smart as he)
kept telling him that God was calling him to something more. But what?
One of the problems was that he didn't really fit into the same mold as his colleagues.
He didn't really fit into any of the four major sects of Judaism.

He couldn't be a Sadducee.

You had to be born into their wealthy class,
an aristocrat, part of society's elite to be a Sadducee.

He could never be an Essene –

living out in the desert apart from society, apart from family life, village life,
and the holiness of ordinary relationships and everyday living.

He couldn't be a Zealot because they were all about overthrowing the government
and he had no interest in that.

For him scripture was about how to live one's own life
and how to be the person God wanted you to be in the world.

So like the vast majority of folk, he had stayed within his Pharisaic tradition.

And yet he didn't fit there either.

Their view of God was so limited.

A divine dispenser of rewards and punishments was about the extent of it.

He couldn't see himself in any other sect,

but even though there was safety & comfort within his own tradition,
he had to admit that it wasn't working.

His congregation was just limping along, contently, taking him for granted,
and not seeing in him what others had seen, what he saw in himself.

Maybe it was the fact that he was 30 years old and having a midlife crisis.

Yeah. He was 30 and what had he done with his life? Not much.

He certainly wasn't fulfilling that grand purpose that he sensed God had for him.

He wanted more. He wanted so much more out of life, out of ministry, out of God.

And now there was someone promising exactly that – something more.

But unfortunately it was his cousin John doing the promising.

John was doing this weird new thing –

not one of the traditional water purification rituals, but baptism by total immersion,
with the promise that something new and spectacular would occur.

John had always been a bit weird,

but his time among the Essenes had only increased his strangeness.

The man dressed in the weirdest clothes, ate the weirdest diet,

& when he wasn't spouting fire & brimstone,

he went around mumbling to himself

in something that didn't sound like Aramaic or Hebrew or any other human language.

At the same time, John was smart and gifted,

and despite the harsh circumstances of his life he had an unshakable faith. He was one of the ones who had wondered aloud if maybe God had a special mission for his cousin.

So should he be baptized by John?
Or would his family and friends and congregants and colleagues all think he had lost his mind? They probably would – he'd be taking a huge risk –
and yet something drew him, pulled him, almost like a magnetic force.

He had to do it no matter what the cost.
He took a deep breath, unlaced his sandals and waded out to his cousin.
When John realized who he was the shock was plain on his face.

“Cousin! Why are you here?”

“To be baptized.”

“You're a rabbi, a super rabbi. What would people think?”

“I want more John. I want more. More of God.

What I'm doing isn't what I'm supposed to do,
but it's all I know how to do and it's all I'm allowed to do –
but I know God has something else in mind.

So baptize me. I'm ready to step out of my old life into something new.”

John's eyes bore into him one more second, & then before he knew it, he was under water and John was holding him there. And holding him. And holding him!

He felt as if his lungs would burst.

Had cousin John finally lost it? Was he going to kill him? Was he going to die?

And then all of a sudden he was up out of the water,
gasping for air, lightheaded, blinded by the light, and deafened by a voice.

At first it sounded like his father... but no... it was a voice from before his father,
a voice that seemed like his own voice, a voice that enfolded him in a homecoming embrace.

“You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased.”

It WAS his father – his REAL father – his father from all eternity, his abba, his God!

As much as he had been loved by his mother, by his parents, by anyone and everyone on earth,
he had never ever felt love like this.

All he could do was allow himself to be swallowed up, engulfed, by that love.

In the light of that love, he knew without a doubt
that he was called to something different, something new,
something far beyond anything he had ever imagined.

He had a brief glimpse of the vision, and then it was gone.

But one thing was sure: his old life was gone and his new life had begun.

He was called to something beyond the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Zealots, or the Pharisees.

He was called to something more than his fledging congregation or guest pulpits.

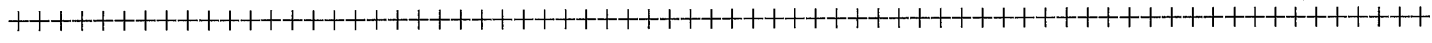
He was called beyond the synagogue.

He was called to minister to all of God's people with the simplest of messages:

because of God's power, because of God's love, you can put all your trust in God above.

Baptism had changed everything.

He could no longer be the person he had been. God was calling him to a whole new life.



We believe that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human.
But the way I look at it, if you know you are God, there is no way you can be fully human.
To be fully human, Jesus must have experienced the same questions and doubts and challenges
that we all experience in our lives.

Jesus' self-identity had to be developed just as ours does.
Jesus had to grow into his understanding of himself, of God and of God's call to him.

For those of us who were baptized as infants,
I think it's difficult to relate to what it meant to Jesus to be baptized.
For the first few hundred years of Christianity adult baptism was the norm,
and when you were baptized everything changed – you could not live as you had before.
Only when Christianity became the state religion
and people were born into the state and then baptized into the church
did infant baptism become standard practice.

The positive side of infant baptism, of course,
is that it makes it clear that salvation is by grace alone.

We don't have to do – we can't do – anything to earn it.
The negative side, however, is that we lose the chance
to participate in a life changing event that we can actually remember.

-But hopefully we have those life changing events at other times –
perhaps at confirmation, or at church camp, or at some other time or times in our lives.

The important thing is
that each and every one of us needs to experience what Jesus experienced that day:
the sure and certain knowledge that God loves us more than we have ever dreamed.

God wants each and every one of his children to hear those words,
“You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased.”

God wants each and every one of us to have had at least a moment
when we experienced the sheer grace and giftedness of it all,
because it's that power and love that God pours into us
that changes us from the inside out,
that puts to death in us all that is old and sinful and fearful,
and raises up in us something new and fresh and forgiven and full of faith.

I believe that God has a plan for each and every one of our lives –
not a plan in the sense of some script that God has written and assigned to us
and that we have to fulfill whether we like it or not,
but rather a plan that comes from the fact that God who made us,
who gave us all of our strengths and weaknesses, all of our gifts, all of our talents,
all of our experiences,
God who knows us inside and out, God who knows the deepest desires of our hearts,
God who knows exactly what the gift of abundant life will mean for each & every person,
that God has all the answers that we seek,
all the solutions to our problems, all the paths to our dreams.

If your life is not what you want it to be,
if you feel like you are stuck and spinning your wheels
and not getting to where you want to go,
if you have a sense that there is something more you have yet to accomplish,
then know that Jesus understands exactly how you feel.

God had given Jesus all the gifts & all the experiences that he needed
to fulfill all the potential that was in him,
& yet for 30 years he didn't venture outside of the box of his tradition,
confining himself to an ordinary life
that met with the approval of family and friends and congregation and colleagues.

He wanted more but to get more he had to risk more –
he had to be willing to leave the old behind and strike out on a road never before traveled.
What gave him the strength and courage to do that was the love
that he experienced the day he was baptized.

God says to you today what God said to Jesus: "You are my beloved child."
Whatever challenge you face, whatever burden you carry, whatever obstacle is in your way,
God is there to lead you, guide you, direct you.
However lonely, however scared, however despairing you feel,
God is there to hold you, enfold you, embrace you.
No matter how you've failed to live up to your potential thus far,
no matter how far you have to go, no matter how little time you have,
God is there to show you the shortest, fastest, best road to take.
You have been buried therefore by baptism into Christ
so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the father,
you, too, might walk in newness of life.

What that new life might be, we may not yet know,
so for now let's just bask in the light of God's love.
You are God's beloved child.
Hear it. Believe it. Live it. **Amen**