

“The Right Thing to Do”

The Way of Jesus – part 1

Matthew 3:1-6, 13-17

Have you ever been whitewater rafting? When I was a youth pastor, I took my group to the New River Gorge in West Virginia for a one-day trip. It was everyone’s first time rafting, so we paid special attention to the guide. She called us her “little duckies,” and told us that obeying the “Momma Duck” was a matter of life and death. She taught us how to safely enter and exit our inflatable rafts, how to shoot the rapids, and what to do if we fell out. Each time we approached white water, she had us line up behind her like a row of little baby ducks.

On this trip, we all knew our roles. Our guide was the Momma, and we were her little duckies. There was never any doubt who was in charge and why. And not once did she ask me to row her boat or lead the expedition.

Have you ever thought about how each of us learns obedience? Respecting authority is good for us, and in the church we teach that God is the ultimate authority in our lives. The right thing to do is obey God, because God is in charge. This is what we teach our children.

Well, there are no whitewater trips available on the River Jordan in Israel, but it is a place where roles were established and where people learned to do the right thing, but maybe in a surprising way.

Our scripture passage this morning focuses on a different kind of river guide. John the Baptizer knew his job. He was there to lead the people to the kingdom of heaven by baptizing and preaching repentance. The gospel of Matthew tells us people came to John in droves. They came from all of Judea, Jerusalem, and the whole river valley to receive the direction he offered.

Matthew 3:6 tells us they confessed their sins and let John baptize them in the muddy waters of the River Jordan.

Matthew notes that John was dressed differently from others. He was marked as a leader, albeit a strange one. John, in his camel hair and belt, resembled another famous prophet from long ago: the prophet Elijah. Elijah was a man who had also lived in the desert, performed miracles, and taught Israel about right and wrong in a time when there was a lot of evil.

John knew the rules of the river. His job was to prepare for Christ the way he was told to: announce the coming of the kingdom, proclaim the need for repentance, and baptize. It was a good plan. A relatively safe plan. Even a fun plan – come on, he got to dunk people in the river for a living!

And as so often happens, Jesus showed up and messed up the plan.

Now, understand that John was expecting Jesus to show up. That was the whole point. But the way Jesus arrived apparently took John by surprise.

I can imagine John standing in the river, when he suddenly recognizes Jesus standing in line with all the people. I doubt he had much warning, maybe a minute or two. Jesus waits patiently for John to baptize him, but John just stares in amazement, apparently frozen. Finally, with a polite cough, I hear Jesus say, “Please, baptize me.”

John looks at Jesus and says, “Are you kidding? It’s supposed to be the other way around. Jesus, you should baptize me!”

John’s surprise could be no greater than if, right before a class IV rapid, my river guide had turned to me and said, “OK, it’s your turn to steer the boat.”

Try, if you can, to get into John’s head for a moment. This prophet said he was not worthy to untie Jesus’ sandals. (Matt 3:11) John knows, he is supposed

to prepare the way for Jesus and then get out of the way. Jesus is the leader, the Master, the Teacher, Lord. Jesus is perfect. To baptize Jesus is an honor too great for John, so he tries to defer. John, in the presence of Jesus, feels the way others do: unworthy. Like Peter after the great catch of fish (Luke 5:8), the centurion who wanted his servant healed (Luke 7:7), and the woman caught in adultery whom Jesus forgave (John 8). When you stand near the Son of God, it doesn't matter if you are a king or a beggar: all feel the power of his presence, and all feel small and unworthy.

Obviously, the question we have to consider is: Why did Jesus need to be baptized? It was not for the repentance of his sins. Clearly, John's reaction indicates that. So what is happening here?

First of all, it is a display of authority. Jesus tells John, “Let it be so now.” (Matt 3:15) Jesus permits John to baptize him. Jesus allows John to serve him.

Secondly, Jesus says, “It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” In this sense, the baptism is for completing what God has already ordained. There are really two meanings for the word righteousness as it applies here. In one sense, righteousness is a divine attribute, a synonym for holiness, truthfulness, and perfection. This baptism is a sign that Jesus is divine. However, it is also a sign of “obedience, faithfulness, and...integrity.” (ANTC) In other words, Jesus was not forced to be baptized. He chose to be baptized, because he knew this was God's will. Jesus was righteous and obedient.

Look what happens when Jesus and John are obedient to God's plan. As Jesus ascends from the water, the Spirit descends on him. God declares publically, in a voice from heaven, “This is my Son.” Jesus is God's Son both by birth and because of his obedience; by who He is and what He does.

The order of these events is crucial. The Holy Spirit comes AFTER the baptism. God speaks AFTER the baptism. God is pleased with his son because of his obedience. All righteousness is fulfilled because John submitted to Jesus, who submitted to God.

In the Christian faith, baptism has always been a symbol of our belief. It marks us for who we are – beloved children of God. It expresses what God does in our lives – God redeems us and anoints us for ministry. And in this passage, we learn a third purpose of baptism. Through Jesus, we see that baptism is a symbol of obedience to God.

I cannot imagine what would have happened if John had ultimately refused to baptize Jesus. He had good reasons. He knew his job. He knew his place. Everything was working great for John, just doing what he had always done.

Sometimes we think we are not worthy of God’s specific attention. We think, “Why should God bother with me? He’s too important to worry about me. I’ll just go on doing what I’ve always done. After all, it’s working.” We are already serving God. Surely that is enough.

But at just the right moment, Jesus shows up and messes things up. He looks at us and says, “Try something new. A twist. Do what you did before, but do it differently.” And we are left with a choice: will we obey him in this new thing or not?

I was in my parents’ church last week, and the preacher was speaking on New Year’s resolutions. She quoted these verses from Isaiah:

"Do not call to mind the former things, or ponder things of the past. Behold, I will do something new. Now it will spring forth; will you not be aware of

it? I will even make a roadway in the wilderness, rivers in the desert.” (Isaiah 43:18-19)

Rivers in the desert. Unexpected, surprising, flowing against the current of normalcy. This speaker challenged us to expect God to do new things in our lives and our relationships.

The thing is, John was doing what he thought was right. But Jesus came along and showed him something new. That’s how it is for us, at least, how it should be. We need to awaken to the new possibilities that Jesus places in our lives. We need to expect God to fulfill his promise, as he said through the prophet Ezekiel (36:26) “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you...”

When we obey God, new things happen. Good things happen. Grace happens. John obeyed Jesus, and the world met the Savior.

God does not need our drudgery. God does not need our same old, same old. God needs our heart. God needs our obedience. God needs our creativity. God wants to do a new thing in our lives.

That is why our response to God’s word today is to renew the covenant of baptism. Baptism is a sign of the new life we live in Christ everyday. Baptism is a sign of what God does in us. Listen to Romans 6:4.

“We therefore were buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:4)

In baptism, we profess our obedience to God. It pours over in our lives. When God asks us to give, we give wholeheartedly and generously, so that our resources can be used to serve others and help them know Christ.

When God asks us to be humble, we do so willingly, holding our tempers, refusing to be self-seeking, watching God improve our relationships through his righteousness. When others see a change in us, they give glory to God.

When God asks us to serve, we do so with joy, because when we teach, when we volunteer, when we help others, the world becomes the place God wants it to be. All through our obedience.

God’s purpose is to save us. God will use us to redeem the world from evil, if we will just listen and follow Jesus, no matter how strange it may seem. Our job is to believe in him and trust him.

God baptizes us into ministry. Yet sometimes we get stuck. So let us engage in this covenant of renewal so that we can be rejuvenated. Let God remind us of what it means to be obedient and to try something new.

Memory Verse: Ephesians 6:7

“Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people...”

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever been on a rafting trip before? What was your guide like?
2. Why did John baptize Jesus? Why did Jesus need to be baptized?
3. Have you been baptized? When and how? Do you think of baptism as a symbol of your obedience?
4. What is your “one thing” you do for God? Is there a way it could be done differently?
5. How do you see God renewing the church through you?