

PERSONAL COVENANTS MADE PUBLIC

1/12/20 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Epiphany 1 (A): Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

So why do you think Jesus “needs” to be baptized? This morning’s Gospel reading leads us straight into an age-old question that scholars, theologians and church geeks around the world have debated for centuries: “Why does Jesus need to be baptized?”

With our Gospel readings over the past several weeks, we’ve made a quick journey from the birth of Jesus on Christmas, to his adulthood, this morning, and the start of his public ministry. The initiation of this public ministry is marked by his baptism. The typical line of questioning goes something like this: “If Jesus was fully divine and without sin, why would he need to be baptized?”

As you might guess, there are several possible answers. One is the other part of that phrase, “fully divine.” Jesus was fully divine AND fully human. One theory is that, perhaps, his humanness required baptism. I’ll say more about that in a few minutes. Another possibility—which seems to be what Jesus is getting at in his conversation with John the Baptist—is that this act of baptism fulfills prophecy.

The scenario, God’s actions, and the words exchanged all harken back to our reading from Isaiah describing how the oppressed will be freed. The affirmation found in Isaiah: “Here is my servant...in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him;” is mirrored in the Gospel: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

The baptism of Jesus is important enough that all four Gospel-writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, include the description of the baptism of Jesus, even though not all of them include a description of his birth. Interestingly, while all four of them include the image of the dove descending, John’s version omits the words: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

And, only in Matthew, do we find this discussion between John and Jesus about his needing to be baptized. But this is typical of Matthew. Throughout his Gospel there are extra bits of explanation added to assure his audience Jesus is indeed fully divine.

Additionally, in that in that sort of “upside-down world” of God that Christie Hamel referred to in her children’s homily last week [at the 10am service], the prophet Isaiah points out that justice won’t be achieved through the entitlement of royalty, but through the sacrifice of everyday people. In the prophet’s vision, old ways of thinking that a king will save people will be replaced with the new idea that God is among us, actively working through us.

In that explanation, the prophet Isaiah mentions the power of a covenant. That covenant is God’s promise—given to us through the very act of creation—to be compassionate and always faithful. So, in that same upside-down way, Jesus is baptized to further establish his solidarity with humanity. He didn’t require repentance, but to model for us the path of discipleship, and the importance of being baptized, he, too, is baptized, thereby making public the personal covenant he had with God.

Let me give you an example of what I mean by “making public a personal covenant”. Last month, as I was boarding my flight back from Seattle, the captain’s voice came over the loudspeaker. Announcing his co-pilot was being promoted to captain, and that as a result would

no longer be flying with this crew, the captain engaged us in what I would call a mini “rite of passage” ceremony. The captain told us how this had been done for him and how much it had meant to him.

So, the flight attendants passed out extra cocktail napkins and pens, and we were all invited to write words of support and encouragement on them. Later, as we deboarded, each of us handed our congratulations-napkins to the pilot being advanced. Did our words make this young pilot into a captain?

Of course not. But imagine how reading them would have helped her realize that others, also see and support her in this new role. We helped make public the personal covenant she had already made to be the best captain she could be.

We have lots of these rites of passage ceremonies in our society that symbolically move us from one stage of life to the next: confirmation, quinceañeras, bat and bar mitzvahs, becoming an Eagle Scout, and graduation, just to name a few. Two people aren’t any more committed to each other after a wedding than they were a few minutes before the ceremony, but by making public their personal covenants with each other, something shifts inside them, and that covenant takes on a deeper meaning.

I think that’s one of the things that’s happening in the baptism of Jesus. Because he was also fully human, I’m imagining there was more than a few moments in his earthly life, when he doubted he was up for the role of Messiah! So, while he might have intellectually understood he had the gifts and skills required for his role, maybe he needed this ceremony to make public the personal covenant he was already living into.

And, then—just in case there was any doubt in his mind—God’s voice booms out as the dove descends to affirm Jesus is indeed ready to embark on the public phase of his earthly ministry; “You are my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

At the same time, as I mentioned earlier, Jesus is calling us into solidarity with him, so joining our master teacher in our own discipleship, there are other messages to be noticed as we recall the event of his baptism. Jesus was fully divine, so he could have just stood out in the river and let the Holy Spirit come down; he could have baptized himself.

Instead, he intentionally involves John the Baptist in a key role. Having John baptize him is the same upside-down movement Jesus displays regularly throughout his time with the disciples. Everyday humans are asked to do the same things Jesus does. So Jesus asks John to baptize him.

That continual turning of things on their heads is replicated throughout the rest of Jesus’s life. There was the time he declared: “I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends.” And the time he washed the feet of the disciples. Again and again, the words, actions and outcomes of Jesus’s ministry draw us in as he refuses to be placed up on a throne, rather, insists he is alongside us; teaching us how to help reconcile the world to God.

The other component of most rites of passage—of making public a personal covenant—is more fully activating the covenant; we move from ceremony into action. The young pilot won’t now just sit around and think fondly about those napkins, she will put her new skills to work, honing them as she employs them.

In this morning’s Gospel reading, Jesus moves directly from his baptism, to implementing the skills necessary for righteous living. In this passage, and in the one from Isaiah,

righteousness, which sometimes comes from a root word with legal connotations, in this case indicates a commitment to living into what we might call the virtues required for discipleship.

You can take a look at the baptismal covenant we make on page 304 of The Book of Common Prayer. Those vows, on page 304, describe how it is we can be better followers of Christ: including, but not limited to, studying Scripture, praying, worshipping in community, honoring the dignity of all human beings. There might be some areas you just can't find a way to focus on right now, but there might be an area listed where you feel called to focus a little more energy in the coming days, weeks and months. Maybe that will become your New Year's resolution.

As you think about which area that might be, consider this quote: "We do not think ourselves into a new way of living. We live ourselves into new ways of thinking." Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest wrote that in his book of Advent meditations. This idea, that we "live ourselves into new ways of thinking" is exactly what we're talking about this morning.

There's a ritual to mark the transition from the old way to the new, and then we begin to live into that new way, which, in turn, helps us understand things in a deeper way: "we live ourselves into new ways of thinking".

When you identify that area—that virtue of discipleship—to which you'd like to devote more time and energy...maybe it's praying more regularly, maybe it's volunteering to teach Sunday School, maybe it's helping out at the Showers, or maybe it's becoming more active in local politics, you might consider creating a mini rite of passage ceremony for yourself.

You could invite me or Richard to pray with you; you could state your intentions "publicly" in front of your family and have them affirm your gifts, or maybe just put a stickie note with a key word on it on your bathroom mirror, and then every morning when you look at yourself, repeat God's words: "You are my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And as you begin living into that, you will start to trust the truth of that: You are God's Beloved, with whom God is well pleased."

-AMEN