

Waves Over the Waters

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
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Matthew 3

In those days, John the Baptist came, making an announcement in the Judean wilderness. He said, “Change your ways! Because the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom it was said, through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one who shouts in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the Lord’s way; straighten out the beaten paths for him.’” Now this John had camel-hair clothing and a leather belt at his hips; grasshoppers and wild honey were his food. At that time, Jerusalem and all Judea and all the Jordan region were coming out to him. And they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they acknowledged their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptized by him, he said to them, “You snake spawn! Who told you to flee the wrath that’s coming? Produce fruit that fits with a change of your ways! And don’t think of saying among yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for a father.’ Because, I tell you, God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones. The axe is against the tree roots already. Every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into fire.

“I baptize you with water for a change of your ways, but someone stronger than I am is coming behind me, someone whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing shovel is in his hand. He will clean his threshing floor and gather his grain into the barn. But he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

About that time Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent that. He said, “I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?” Jesus gave him this answer, “Allow it now. It’s fitting for us to complete all the religious requirements this way.” Then he allowed it.

As soon as Jesus had been baptized, he came up from the water, and — ah! — heaven was opened to him. And he saw God’s Spirit descending like a dove, coming upon him. And — ah! — from heaven a voice said, “This is my beloved son. I am pleased with him!”

Sermon

According to an ancient Latin tradition, when Jesus was baptized by John the Jordan River flamed with bright light. Here in Ohio we know something about burning rivers. But that ancient tradition pictures something more extraordinary than the smoldering Cuyahoga — more extraordinary, but totally out of keeping with the biblical accounts of Jesus’ baptism. John the Baptist might have expected the Jordan River to catch fire when the Messiah stepped into it. What actually happened was quite unremarkable, from outward appearances at least. Jesus was baptized, but no one noticed. And the procession to and from the Jordan continued unabated.

When Jesus was baptized, nothing much happened at all. Except for the dove. But only Jesus saw the dove — and probably John, though Matthew is vague about that. And there was the voice. But only Jesus heard the voice — and maybe John. But no one else heard it. The voice didn’t peal like thunder. Sound waves do have a way of traveling over water, especially when the water is calm. But the sound of this voice was really for Jesus alone.

Let me say something about that voice, and about the dove. The voice conferred a new sense of identity upon Jesus. “This is my beloved son,” the voice said. “I am pleased with him.” Drawing on language familiar to Jesus from the psalms and the prophets, the voice said, “You are my chosen king.” *Son [of God]* was a common designation for the king, especially in the psalms. The voice said, “You are

my chosen servant.” According to the prophet, the *servant* was the object of God’s delight, the one with whom God was pleased. In effect the voice was saying, “Jesus, you are my royal servant.” That sounds like a contradiction: one person at one time being both king and slave. Yet as king and as slave, this one person was loved by God.

And down flew a dove from heaven. It was the Spirit of God, resting upon Jesus. It was the Spirit of God, anointing Jesus with power: power to be God’s chosen king, power to be God’s chosen servant, power to embrace the identity he had been given and to live out that identity daily.

The Spirit of God came upon Jesus.

And the voice of God led Jesus, as it echoed over the waters of his baptism.

Where did the voice lead him? In a moment it would lead him deep into the wilderness. There he would be tempted and tested. There he would prove himself to be a new Adam, the first of a new humanity. There he would prove himself to be a new Israel, the first of a new people of God. There he would gather up all the pains and promises of the past and the present and open the way to the future.

The voice would lead him to discover his unique vocation: to embrace paths of obedience, humility, and sufferings; to be health and peace, food and drink, for God’s children; to be the one who would endure judgment, the righteous judgment of God, in order to bring justice to those oppressed by the unrighteous judgments of mere human beings.

The voice would call to Jesus. It would echo over the waters of his baptism. And he would follow that voice wherever it led, even into sorrow. It was, after all, the voice of God.

Have you heard that voice? The voice of God speaks to us. It calls to us. Sound waves radiate over the still waters of our baptism, whether we were baptized last Sunday or eighty-two years ago. In baptism a new identity is conferred upon us. To our old name — the name our parents gave us — another name is joined. Last Sunday, for example, Emma Grace Rumbalski — that’s the name her parents gave her — was baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. With that name, we are claimed as God’s children and we share the anointing of our elder brother Jesus. We are anointed to be royal slaves with him. Anointed to confess the name of Jesus Christ, anointed to sacrifice ourselves gladly, anointed to battle against sin and the devil, and anointed one day — not yet, but one day — to reign with Christ (see Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 32).

This is who we are. This is who we are meant to be. This is why with baptism comes the promise of the Holy Spirit: a promise that, when we ask, the Spirit will rest upon us; a promise that, when we ask, the Spirit will empower us to become who we are in Christ.

The voice of God echoes over the waters of our baptism.

And it names us every day the children of God.

And that voice leads us! The voice leads us on a life-long adventure, to explore what it means to live and to die (and ultimately to live again) as God’s children. Discipleship is all about spending your life living out your identity, your identity as a child of God through Jesus Christ.

The destination is clear — even if we only dimly know what awaits us — to be with God forever. The destination is clear. But the paths are in many ways unknown to us. That’s what makes it an adventure. Jesus didn’t know from the start what it meant for him to be the Son of God. He had to work that out for himself through prayer and weeping and testing, and not without encouragement and strengthening: from Moses and Elijah, from angels, from the voice and the Spirit of God. In the same way, we don’t know just what it means to be a child of God. We have to work that out through prayer and humility and suffering, and not without encouragement from our brothers and sisters and from the Word and the Spirit of God.

And I don’t think one person’s path will be the same as another’s. The destination is the same. But no two children are alike — not in any family, not even identical twins. Each of us has a unique make-up.

Each of us has a unique story-so-far. Each of us stumbles and bumbles and falls in our own way. And with the Spirit's help, each of us will find our way home to God. But wherever we start, however we stumble, there are some common features on our paths to God.

Our Catechism says that God calls each one of us to confess the name of Jesus Christ. Yesterday we had a meeting of the Classis Lake Erie Executive Committee. A question came up during our discussions, a question that I can put this way: "Do the people you live with, do the people you work with, do the people you work out with, do the people you go to school with, do the people you play poker with know that you belong to Jesus Christ?" If they don't, maybe you're not listening to the voice.

Our Catechism says that God calls each one of us to sacrificial thanks. A path toward God will cost us something. On a path toward God, we will be challenged and stretched. Have you noticed how inspiring stories, whether fact or fiction, usually involve paths that are difficult or dangerous, whether the path belongs to Frodo Baggins or Abraham Lincoln? A path toward God is not without difficulty, not without danger, not without sacrifice. The voice at our baptism calls us to die before we rise. Do you hear the voice? What sacrifice does it ask of you, child of God?

Our Catechism says that God calls each one of us to battle against sin and the devil. I always heard that language in connection with personal moral struggle, the struggle to be sexually chaste, to be honest, to be generous. But sin and the devil have a larger domain than my heart. Sin and the devil oppress the poor and the powerless. Sin and the devil oppress the homeless and the hopeless. And women and children are victims too often. The prophet says that God's servant is anointed to bring forth justice. Your path and my path toward God will be paths of justice, if we're listening to the voice that echoes over the waters of our baptism. Child of God, how does God call you to be a servant of justice?

The Jordan River did not burst into flame when Jesus was baptized. Nor did Emma Rumbalski last Sunday receive a baptism *flambé*. Nonetheless the Spirit of God burns within the children of God. The Spirit is the power that accompanies us on the paths that lead to God, paths of witness, paths of sacrifice, paths of justice. This is where the voice of God calls us.

If you haven't heard that voice lately, may I suggest that you just sit there? Sit there. Sit anywhere. Sit still. Be quiet. Listen. Give it time. Do it again. And again. Shhhh. The voice isn't loud, and it may say something only for you to hear. Just listen.