

Baptism of Our Lord

THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST

Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism of Our Lord

Analysis by Dana Bjorlin

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 15 But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

As we read Matthew's Gospel through this coming year we're going to repeatedly hear about fulfillment, mostly of Old Testament prophetic proclamations. I recall being reminded by A.v.R. Sauer in seminary that fulfillment means “a filling full” of something – often (and most likely) when the prophet hadn't a clue as to what that fulfillment might be – especially since the New Testament “fulfillments” of OT prophecies are far removed from any immediate context which the OT prophet was addressing. This week's gospel reading has Jesus relate fulfillment to righteousness. My guess is that neither John the Baptist nor we have a clue as to how that is fulfilled either. Maybe today's text gives us a clue.

DIAGNOSIS: Characters in Confusion

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Epiphany or Advent?*

Those who attend worship services regularly might have a sense of déjà vu hearing this week's Gospel reading. We've already heard about John the Baptist, haven't we? His preachments regarding the need to repent, a warning about judgment, embodying Isaiah's prophecy regarding a voice in the wilderness lifting up valleys and leveling out mountains. John warned of destruction for unfruitful (i.e. unrepentant) children of Abraham and encouraged development known as bearing fruit worthy of repentance. But that was Advent, the time designated to get us (better) ready to celebrate Christmas.

Now look at the calendar! (Christmas was more than two weeks ago!) This is Epiphany! That silly word means the "showing forth" of Christ's godliness and glory. Jesus going to John for baptism doesn't seem like much of a way to relate the manifestation of Christ's glory. If we've got to hear about John, then John just might have it right: he needs to be baptized by Jesus. Even Jesus encouraging patience can't seem to make that different.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Wants versus Needs*

John declares that he really, really, really needs to be baptized by Jesus. John is so like us. It's amazing how we so easily confuse needs and desire. That fresh strawberry garnish on my plate of chocolate-caramel cheesecake at the December company feast: was it really needed? If needed, then the leveling of valleys and mountains for the Interstate highways and the development of berry patches on subtropical sandbars is

also needed. But if we catch on to how serious it is for desire to get confused with needs, then we might also see that much of the concrete used in superhighway construction could have better built water treatment plants in places like Haiti.

John can be so like us. John claims he needs something, but really he just wants someone who will outdo him in delivering sharper sermons of hellfire and tougher types of tongue-lashings.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Terms and Turns*

Let's be clear. What we really see going on is that John the Baptizer wants a Savior on his terms and not on God's terms. It doesn't matter whether that's before or after Christmas. And we can be so like John. But fulfilling righteousness is, finally, a God thing and not a human thing. When Jesus shows up for and asks for baptism, John is going to be turned on his head. From this point on, the rubble-ing and ripening in all human endeavors are declared void, empty, and of no account. Even improvements through washings or warnings like John's aren't enough.

John so liked to declare judgment and warn of woe. But did he consider the consequences of such eventualities? With God's bulldozers revving their engines, John's river could easily become a desert and the waters flow in completely new directions. John should have been heading for shelter from that Holy Wind (Spirit) he proclaimed could blow more powerfully than he ever imagined (Ps. 29:7b-8). Where can he turn and what terms could he use if those granaries are splintering like kindling wood, and even that wheat (he thought so highly of) now flies like chaff for the fire? And we are just like John.

PROGNOSIS: Character of the Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Terms of Mercy*

Good thing for us that we have a God who, while we are bent on getting what we want, bends down to step in with what we need. In Jesus, God steps into the confusions of our existence: our presumptions about God, our blind acting without God, our highly disciplined practices of polite piety and our prescriptions for others. God steps in with mercy and grace.

In the musical production "Godspell," Jesus appears before John the Baptist and utters a line that goes something like: "I want to get washed up." In "washed up" there is a superb double meaning of either "getting cleaned" or "being worn out." Since Jesus didn't need to be cleansed of his sin, "washed up" points to the surprising intention of what God means by a filling full of righteousness. Jesus got worn out totally so that we can be cleaned up thoroughly. But Jesus is not "worn out" at the Jordan River when he takes a baptismal dip, but at Calvary; there, lifted on the cross, Jesus gets into the thick of our sin, our lack of repentance, takes on the ultimate humiliation of death as judgment; he accepts it willingly, and with his death he truly "fills up all righteousness." The cross also is not where God's Messiah belongs, but it is where God has chosen to meet us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Wanting What Jesus Wants*

Having been loosened from the claims of wants and desires we see life in another context, we look to the One who stooped in mercy for us, and we stoop before him in praise and thanksgiving. And in praising the one who stooped to our needs, we can move our focus away from ourselves and see the needs of others, as Jesus has seen and responded to our needs. We can share in their hurts and rejoice with their joys.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Advent and Epiphany*

The Christian life is somewhat strange. It's never always one thing or another. Martin Luther mused about being simultaneously saint and sinner (simil iustus et peccator). In the Christian life we constantly move from Advent repentance through Christmas to Epiphany manifestation. Our daily walk of faith is one exhibited in both confession and absolution. Not that we manifest anything of ourselves. Rather we make known the joy and hopefulness that come to those who are declared forgiven in Christ.