

The Baptism of Our Lord

RIVERBANK RELIGION AND FREE-FLOWING FAITH

Matthew 3:13-17

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Analysis by Eric W. Evers

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.”

DIAGNOSIS: Damming the River

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Riding the Wave of Success*

John has been wildly “successful.” The crowds are electrified at his preaching, he has “called out” the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, and he knows the promised Messiah is at hand. He has lived through a dry time; the drought of prophecy has been long, and now John was able to proclaim that the storm of God’s kingdom was about to break out upon the nation. It all sounds great, doesn’t it? Unfortunately, it seems that John’s success at the riverside was making him a little too confident in himself.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Controlling the River

In many ways, what happens when Jesus comes to John is a reflection of where it happens. John has become like the banks of the River Jordan. When Jesus comes to him to be baptized, he is scandalized. The promised Messiah, the Savior, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, coming to him, for a sinner's sign of repentance? Unbelievable! And so John tries to guide this river, direct the flow of Jesus' intentions. He tries to steer Jesus away from this open identification with sinners, channel him into a more spiritual, more dignified role. The real irony here is that John was no backward-looking arch-conservative. He was a radical, through and through, denouncing the religious "establishment" with its empty rules and regulations. But radicalism can bring the same dangers as traditionalism. It wants to fit Jesus into its own agenda. And for John, that very pious agenda did not include Jesus getting dunked like an everyday sinner.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Dam(ned)

But this condescension, this identification with sinners, is a necessary stop on the stream that began with a birth in a manger and ends in cross-and-nail agony. And so John here sets himself up against the saving purpose of God. He wants the Savior on his terms, not God's terms. He is trying to dam the course of Jesus' ministry; he is trying to contain the uncontainable. But Jesus will fulfill all righteousness, all of it, including the righteousness of humans being thwarted in their attempts to constrain God. And any dam in the way of the river of God's purposes will be broken. John will be broken, for he stands opposed to the work of the Messiah.

PROGNOSIS: Mercy Bursting Forth

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal solution) – Streams of Mercy,

Never Ceasing

But then, we must ask: just where is this river flowing, after all? If it won't follow the course John the Baptist wants it to take, where does the living water want to go? The answer is that this is a river of grace, a storm surge of mercy. Oh, it will break the dams and overflow the banks that try to channel its flow. But as the flood washes over the land, it washes away sin and dissolves rebellion. This river brings a drowning through death, unto life.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Going with the Flow*

And this river will sweep you up in its flood. We might want to contain God, and we might want Jesus to fit into our particular programs. But his mercy will burst those riverbanks and carry you on a course of God's choosing. And the ride won't always be smooth. In fact, rushing waters wear things down. That is what this grace flood does. It takes people like us who want Jesus on our terms (a Jesus who will, inevitably, end up looking as we imagine ourselves) and changes us, polishes us, and conforms us to its purposes.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Channels*

Such erosion is painful. It kills us, but it is a killing that brings new life. It leaves us renewed by the living waters of life that rush over us. And even as it catches us up in the mighty flood, eventually it deposits us, puts us down. God's mercy places us in the world, often in places we'd never imagine ourselves to be, far from the banks of the river where we seemed to have everything so securely in hand and God's purposes seemed so easy to figure out. But the Jesus who identified with sinners at the River Jordan will, in turn, put us into the world of sinners. If I can stretch the metaphor a bit beyond the breaking point, the living waters of his Spirit change us from dams into channels of his mercy. We no longer try to contain his purposes;

his purposes pour through us. And those purposes are life, mercy, and grace. May we be so carried away by him that others get caught up in the flood.