

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – January 12, 2020
Cleansed - Isaiah 42:1-7 and Matthew 3:13-17

Following the birth of our Lord at Christmas, the shepherds, the magi, the angels, and even King Herod himself confirmed what Jesus’ parents already knew – that theirs was no ordinary child. Fast-forward 12 years and we learn about Jesus as a boy in the temple. It is there that his self-consciousness is on full display. For though he is born a Savior, it is evident that he also grows into that role, until he fully embodies the life that God has called him to lead.

In today’s second lesson, Jesus has reached adulthood. Often believed to be 30 years old, he now demonstrates an expanded consciousness regarding his role and purpose for the world. And yet, curiously, at such a pivotal moment as this, he chooses not to return to the temple, but instead seeks out a prophetic voice in the wilderness. And there, in the Jordan River, he is baptized by his cousin, John.

Jesus’ baptism takes place in the following way: “the heavens are opened, a voice comes from heaven, the Spirit is given.” Each of these elements are highly symbolic and herald the presence of God. ¹ Here, we find the affirmation of “Jesus’

¹ M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew, New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Volume VIII*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press: 1995), 160.

core identity” as God’s Son.² His messianic ministry is set to begin. The epiphany has drawn near.

Jesus is, for an undetermined period, John’s disciple.³ In fact, it is fitting to say that Christianity emerged “out of the Baptist’s movement,” and to acknowledge that “some of Jesus’ first followers had been John’s.”⁴ And yet, this rite of passage was quite unusual. Granted, there were a number of water rituals that existed in ancient Judaism. But these rituals “were frequent and symbolized the continual washing away of sins.”⁵ From the best evidence available to us, John’s “once-and-for-all” baptism “was without precedent in the Jewish world.”⁶

All of this begs the question: why, then, did Jesus desire to be baptized – especially since this rite is closely related to the forgiveness of sins? If we say that Jesus had no sin, then why would he desire to go through this? As Douglas Hare reminds us, Jesus, as the one who will save his people from their sins, consecrates himself “to his vocation by joining the sinful multitude in the waters of the Jordan. As the one destined to be their lord and king he accepts the sacrament of renewal of

² Mark Abbott, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press: 2019), 175.

³ Boring, 159.

⁴ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press: 2009), 19.

⁵ Hare, 18.

⁶ Hare, 18.

God's people." And, in doing so, "he takes the first step toward Calvary."⁷ Jesus, ever the teacher, is unwilling to command others to do something that he is unwilling to do himself.

Today, we have ordained and installed deacons and elders to serve as leaders in the life of our church. Prior to their commissioning, they too submitted themselves to the waters of baptism. And they too were raised to new life. Their continued membership in the church of Jesus Christ, their willingness to answer God's call to serve, and their public profession of faith makes their baptismal covenant vibrant, and powerful, and life giving.

And each time that they say "yes" to all that God is doing, they demonstrate the meaning of conversion, with which baptism has always been associated. "A good nontechnical definition of conversion... is catching on to what God is doing around us and in us," knowing that "what is true of an individual is also true for the church. Not only is conversion a matter of catching up to what God is doing. It may also be catching up to what God is doing."⁸

⁷ Hare, 21.

⁸ Stephen Farris, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press: 2019), 170.

And today, as we come to this shared table, and as we remember the waters of our own baptisms, we reaffirm our commitment “to his story, his ways, and his fate as our own.”⁹ For like those who lead us, we too have been cleansed, forgiven, and converted. May our lives bear witness to the reality of this good news. All thanks be to God. Amen.

⁹ Stanley P. Saunders, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press: 2019), 173.