Sermon 01-12-2020

By Water and the Spirit

Matthew 3:13-17

**Sermon Starter**

There is this couple, we will call them John and Martha. They have had a major argument and were giving each other **GRAPHIC: the “silent treatment.”** Have you ever been in that position, caught up in a “silent treatment” argument?

But then John realized that he would need his wife to wake him early the next morning so he could meet up with some friends to play golf. Not wanting to be the first to break the silence (and so lose the “war”), he wrote on a piece of paper: “Please wake me at 5 a.m.”

The next morning John woke up only to discover it was 9 a.m. and that his friends had already left for the golf course without him. Furious, he was about to look for his wife and find out why she hadn’t awakened him when he noticed a piece of paper by the bed. The note read: “It is 5 a.m. Wake up.”

Maybe that illustration is too close to home for some of us to find it humorous. Perhaps it’s too descriptive of the games we play. However, have you ever thought about this? We might even play that same game with God? Sometimes we give him the silent treatment because something didn’t come out the way we wanted it to, and we blame God. Or we pretend to give in to his requests, but we only do it on our terms, like the husband and wife in the story. We give the impression of obedience and devotion, but we’re still in charge of our own lives and still living for ourselves.

**Jesus at the Jordan**

In this text from Matthew 3, we find a totally different approach to pleasing God. John the Baptist and Jesus both bow to what God has instructed them to do and both humble themselves before one another.

The scene is one that you can put yourself into. You can almost hear the rush of the water as it forcefully moves down the Jordan River. You can see the sun glistening off the water. You can smell its freshness and feel its coolness in the heat of a summer day. John baptized in these surroundings because the clean, running stream of water symbolized cleanliness and purity, and John’s baptism was a commanding one for the repentance of sins. He could have done it anywhere, but because John was the baptizer, he chose the forceful waters of the Jordan. Because his job was to clear the path for the coming Messiah, he wanted that path to be as wide and long as the Jordan itself. Well, this description of the Jordan River isn’t what it is today. Here is the site where scholars believe John baptized the faithful **GRAPHIC: Jordan River site#1.**

Jesus comes to John, a reversal of protocol. That’s like the general of an army walking up to a captain and saluting him. John is most likely standing in the midst of a multitude descending upon the Jordan. We picture Jesus standing in line among the throng of people that included the poorest of beggars and the highest-ranking Pharisees and Sadducees. Men and women came to John from all over Jerusalem and Judea to confess their sins and be washed clean of the dirt that covers their lives.

Suddenly John becomes aware of Jesus’ presence. **GRAPHIC: Jordan River #2**. He looks up to see him standing there and immediately recognizes Jesus as the one he’s been telling everyone about. John cannot believe his eyes. The Messiah has arrived just as God promised. It is John who humbles himself before Jesus. It is John who requests that Jesus baptize him, not the other way around. This wild man of the Jordan who has been shouting with authority at the leaders of the faith and the community is now brought to his knees in humility and adoration. This prophet who spoke with the power and strength of God behind every word is bowing down in submission to the One whose dusty sandal strap John feels unworthy to even untie.

Yet John’s unblemished obedience to God can only be outdone by Jesus. “Let it be so now,” Jesus says. “For it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” And John knew immediately that Jesus was right. As inadequate as he might feel to be baptizing Jesus, John understood that it was what God wanted. So, John consented to the command and baptized the Lamb of God.

**GRAPHIC: We have a picture of John and Jesus standing in the water together.** We can see Jesus yielding to the baptism of John just like everyone else. And we visualize a sinless man coming up out of the waters to the voice of God proclaiming: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

This became Jesus’ “coming-out” party. When he came out of the water, it was his introduction to the world and the beginning of his ministry. It was the inauguration of the kingdom of God on earth. Through Jesus, the kingdom of God was both “now” and “yet to come.” And this kingdom would demand from Jesus an uncompromising obedience to God and a loving responsibility to a fallen human race.

**Entering through Baptism**

Through baptism, Jesus was publicly given God’s seal of approval and by his example believers are invited to enter the kingdom of God through baptism. In the church that emerged as the instrument of God’s kingdom on earth following Jesus’ resurrection, baptism became the initiation rite of entering. And many believe that the Holy Spirit enters the life of the Christian in transforming ways when a person is baptized, just like the dove that descended upon Jesus.

Although John thought Jesus should be baptizing him, he was obedient to the will of God. And even though Jesus was without sin, he obeyed his Father in heaven and submitted to the waters of baptism. Who among us dare try entering the kingdom of God outside of baptism? So important did baptism appear to be to Jesus that in the book of Matthew, his final dialog with his disciples included his instructions to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” He further instructs his disciples to teach the new followers to “obey everything” that he commanded them.

From the preaching of John the Baptist, to the baptism of Jesus, and forward into the New Testament church in the book of Acts, people are baptized in obedience to God. And today, **GRAPHIC: even if we can’t agree on the way it’s done, or at what point in a person’s life he or she is baptized,** the church still baptizes in obedience to God’s command. We believe that we are united with Christ through baptism, and thus will be united with him in resurrection.

**GRAPHIC: In the 1980 movie Superman 2**, Superman and Lois Lane finally, after years of dancing around the issue, decide that they’re in love and want to marry. Because he wants a “normal marriage” with Lois, Superman chooses to give up his superpowers to become just ordinary Clark Kent, knowing that if he surrenders his powers he can never have them back.

**GRAPHIC: It doesn’t take long until three evil super-villains from Superman’s home planet of Krypton** take control of the White House with plans to rule planet Earth. The world needs Superman but it’s too late! A dejected Clark Kent walks through the rubble of what was once Superman’s fortress of solitude and cries out, “Father, I have failed.”

Then the scene changes to Metropolis. The super-villains are wreaking havoc and terrorizing the townspeople. Just then ... that famous music starts playing. And suddenly, up in the sky it’s not a bird; it’s not a plane; **GRAPHIC: it’s Superman!** Somehow, someway, he regained his superpowers and is back protecting the people of the world. Superman defeats the villains and continues his fight for truth, justice and the American way.

But let’s look at what happened here. The writers of this screenplay established a rule that if Superman surrenders his powers, he can never get them back. Then, he surrendered his superpowers. If the writers had stuck to the rule, Superman would be history. But the writers took some liberties that probably make literary purists cringe: they changed the rules in the middle of the story in order to get Superman off the hook.

That’s what baptism does. It rewrites the rules. **GRAPHIC: It allows God’s grace to rule over laws.** Since we are unable to earn our salvation by the letter of the law, that is, through perfect obedience to God, God changed the rules. He sent Christ to die for our sins. God changed the rules in the middle of the story to get us off the hook.

**GRAPHIC: Jesus “instructed” his disciples to baptize the nations. You could say he “commanded” them to do so. But we shouldn’t view baptism as an obligation, rather as a gift.** A gift just like the grace that it represents to us (or bestows upon us). A gift just like the salvation it ushers into our lives. A gift given to us by a Savior who one day came to the water to meet John. And in the waters of baptism, Jesus began a journey to the cross so that for our sake, the waters of baptism would have real and eternally lasting meaning.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.