

**A New Beginning**  
**Cooke's-Portsmouth United Church**

**Isaiah 42:1-9**

**Matthew 3: 13-17**

There are some Sunday's in the liturgical year that I find challenging to preach because the theology is deep, and difficult to comprehend let alone explain. Even the greatest preacher and scholar cannot say for sure and certain what a given text means and why it was recorded in the canon of the Bible. The best that we can do is to ponder the text and the commentary around the text and pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to illuminate. The baptism of Jesus, which is the reading every year on the second Sunday of the New Year, has long mystified me and I have never felt equal to the task of explaining it, or finding an application for it in the living of our lives of faith. It evokes more question than answers; but was seen as significant a day in the life of Jesus and John that all four of the evangelists included it in their gospels.

Key among the questions posed is why Jesus presented himself to John for baptism at all. If John's was a baptism of repentance and a turning from sin, and, we all hold the belief that Jesus was without sin, why did he present himself to John in the first place? Some scholars suggest that it was so that Jesus could readily identify with the ones that he had come to save. He made himself one with the people he had come to likewise influence and turn from the old ways. Baptism was not entirely new; Baptism was practiced in Judaism but not for Jews.

To this day only converts to Judaism must walk through water as a sign and symbol of being cleansed from sin and confirmed into the new faith. Prior to John's preaching no Jew would presume to see themselves as sinful and outside of the purview of the righteousness of God.

William Barclay wrote:

Jews knew and used baptism, but only for proselytes who came into Judaism from some other faith. It was natural that the sin-stained, polluted proselyte should be baptized, but no Jew had ever conceived that he, a member of the chosen people, a son of Abraham, assured of God's salvation, could ever need baptism. Baptism was for sinners, and no Jew ever conceived of himself as a sinner shut out from God. Now for the first time in their national history the Jews realized their own sin and their own claimant need of God. "It is the fact that never in all history before this had any Jew submitted to being baptized. Never before had there been such a unique national movement of penitence and of search for God. The former things have come to pass and new things are being declared. Long before John or Jesus had their sacramental encounter on the banks of the Jordan the prophet Isaiah spoke about the compassion of God's servant who would not harm a compromised reed; and counselled his hearers that God was doing new things. So we begin this morning grappling with both the ministry and theology of John- the last prophet of the old ways and the one who inaugurated some of the practices associated with the new way as proclaimed by Jesus.

When last Jesus was mentioned by Matthew it was in the closing verses of chapter two when the Holy family returned from Egypt and had settled in Nazareth. Decades have come and gone. And while we may assume that Jesus and John had some association with one another during annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem, there is nothing recorded in scripture to testify to such. John heralds that one is coming who is greater than he and suggests ritual cleansing and turning away to prepare for that encounter.

Jesus comes to John and presents himself for baptism. At first John is reluctant to perform the ritual-feeling unequal to the task. Jesus is not the typical baptismal candidate. It is he who should be immersing John. A commanding word from Jesus and he relents. My commentary informs

that John is to baptize Jesus “now” as an act of submission and obedience to God. It was not Jesus who was being submissive to John but rather John who was being submissive to Jesus—commanded to baptize him now! So in seeking baptism Jesus is affirming the ministry of his forebearer; is acting in solidarity with other pilgrims who had been drawn to the Jordan and he is also a commanding presence.

As his ministry unfolds he will command demons to exit the body; command that the winds and the waves be still; throw the moneychangers out of the temple in authority and condemnation. In tandem with being immersed the baptism of John he is also demonstrating messianic authority. It is much more than just an exchange between John and Jesus; it is an exchange between Jesus and God, and by extension Creator and Redeemer to us disciples. It is both awesome and confusing for us at the same time. How best to illustrate the height and depth of the text?

My family and I were gifted recently with some home baking and a jar of peach preserves by members of this congregation. When I thanked the individuals responsible I was further gifted by the response of the gifter, who volunteered “We are so happy in this congregation and what better way to demonstrate that than with something home made.” When I realized that we would be pondering the significance of the baptism of Jesus this morning that brief conversation and the act of love that preceded it came to the fore.

As with Jesus there is more at play in the significance of the proffered gift than Jesus simply showing up at the Jordan and conversing with John. As outlined his request for baptism was an act of affirmation, solidarity and command. And the action of making something homemade was about gratitude, creation, devotion and time. I was the beneficiary of a gift that really is intended for every person who makes this community warm, welcoming and functioning. I may be the one who is most visible but it is the invisible grace at work that has touched hearts and

transformed lives. It is not possible for each of you to receive home baking and home preserves so I am the lucky one who gets it on your behalf!

After his baptism Jesus began his ministry. Like many of us baptism is the beginning of our faith journey. For many of us- but not all of us- our relationship with Christian community begins with being taken to church in our parents arms. We experience the nursery, Sunday school, perhaps confirmation. Some see confirmation as a logical end to their Sunday commitment rather than a new beginning. At the beginning of a New Year, following Epiphany, we revisit the official beginning of the ministry of Jesus. Like the New Year before us we begin at the beginning of the ministry of the one in whose name we live and whose life we try to model.

Along with being present at his baptism we will watch as he is tempted as we are tempted, and we will revisit the stories of his commanding ability to exalt the lowly and reduce the lofty. He will model for us the value of the one who wrestles with illness and infirmity and remind us that all are worthy to be called sons and daughters. He will likewise model inclusivity, extending grace and healing to those outside of Judaism. He will affirm and confound and will refuse to be silenced. Once he was spirited away to Egypt for safekeeping, but never again will he run from his enemies. But before he has done any of these things he presents himself for baptism by John: showing his affirmation of the ministry of the one sent to inaugurate the way; demonstrating solidarity with the people that he had come to engage and save; and showing his commanding presence to get done what he wants done regardless of the opinions and reticence of others. And if Jesus needed affirmation that he was one with God he receive sit in the reassuring words of God:, the heavens split open, the Spirit descends and he is affirmed and owned as God's son, the beloved in whom God takes great pride and pleasure. The accompanying text from Isaiah also

illustrates the very tender side of the commanding presence. We readily identify Jesus with the one written about by Isaiah years before his birth.

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,

my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

I have put my spirit upon him;

he will bring forth justice to the nations.

He will not cry or lift up his voice,

or make it heard in the street;

a bruised reed he will not break,

and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;

he will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not grow faint or be crushed

until he has established justice in the earth;

and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

The first verse is reminiscent of the words heard by Jesus after he emerged from the baptismal waters. The heavens open and the spirit descends and the relationship between Jesus and God is proclaimed. Jesus is the one in whom the spirit rests and in whom the Creator takes great delight.

We then learn of the compassion and sensitivity of the servant: unwilling to destroy a bent twig; not one to cry or extinguish the light in any way. He will not quit nor be rendered vulnerable by circumstance and he will be successful in establishing justice.

Many of us may be able to see the person of Jesus reflected and embodied in this image from the pen of Isaiah recorded long before his birth in Bethlehem. But there are two components to the

reading. In addition to highlighting the compassion and power of the servant, it also testifies to the responsibilities that followers have as believers and followers. The text reminds us of the responsibility that creation has to the creator.

We are to live as light-reflecting the light of God; opening the eyes of those blind to the truth; to bring light to those who are in prison and to acknowledge that the former things have passed and seek out the new. We can see in John the genesis of bridging the old and the new through baptism. And Jesus carries the newness of liberation forward. It is a new beginning for us as individuals and as a community of believers and it begins in baptism rather than culminating in baptism. As it begins again in the resurrection. Ours is a God of new beginnings.

Things ebb and cease to exist- like congregations and theological colleges- and we may grieve their passing as a sign of powerlessness. But God is not powerless. Things may not unfold as we hope and imagination. Faith is no guarantee of an easy life, and God is not a Fairy Godmother who exists to make our dreams come true. When the earth beneath our feet begins to shift, the rock of faith holds us steady. When our hearts are broken by circumstances beyond our control, God whispers encouragement to our souls. This is our new beginning. We model at the dawn of a New Year the significance of baptism: it is a sign of affirmation to the One in whose image we have been created; it is a means of sharing in solidarity with the Son who is our companion and inspiration in the triumphs and tragedies of life; and it empowers us to reflect the light of God's grace and hope. So when things become demanding and challenging for you remember the affirmations made on your behalf in baptism by your parents and confirmed upon confirmation by your own lips:

I believe in God and in God's love.

I believe that God has been made known to us in Jesus of Nazareth who lived, died and lives again.

I believe that God remains in the world in the Spirit to strengthen, guide and inspire.

This is our faith. This is our hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.