

The Beloved  
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 42:1-4  
Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 3:13-17

Some Bible stories just don't translate well to film, and Jesus' baptism would certainly be numbered among them. In looking for a video to give a sense of the story to the folks at Faith Practice, Rebecca and Jessica quickly discarded one that had about as much authenticity as Alex Trebek singing *Gimme Shelter*. I didn't confess it to them, but I actually paid to see the movie from which the baptism scene they were laughing about was taken, way back when it debuted in 1979. I was in Kansas City the night before a marathon I was running with friends. It was 38 degrees that night, and trying to be cool instead of smart, we were racing across the Alameda Plaza in a classic 50s era Buick convertible with the top down, all hunkered down as the crazy driver kept saying, "Just five more minutes ... just five more minutes."

I have to admit, I remember more about the car than the movie. Let's just say there wouldn't be anybody thanking the Academy of Motion Pictures on Oscar night. I mean, it's the Gospel, how are you going to mess up the greatest story ever told? Well, the director obviously figured it out. In the baptism scene, John the Baptist's hair

looked like ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons stuck his finger in a light socket. And his acting chops reminded me of Vince Vaughn's character in *Four Christmases* when he's drafted to play Joseph in a church Christmas pageant. "Woman, swaddle that baby!"

John the Baptist wasn't even interacting with the people wading up to him to be baptized. They basically had to baptize themselves while John was busy trying to channel his inner Lawrence Olivier: "As it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah, 'Someone is shouting the in desert! Get the road ready for the coming of the Lord...' I'm not even sure what translation he was reading. For one thing, if you want to be true to the text, it wasn't John the Baptist who was quoting Isaiah anyway. It was Matthew quoting Isaiah to describe John.

Meanwhile, across from Hollywood John on shore there was this murmuring crowd of taciturn faces, necks straining like they are counting the heads in front of them, worried over how long this is going to take. *We're not going to make it back to Irving's birthday party at this rate! You'd think they'd have a better system than this! Why can't they do more than one at a time. It's not like John is helping. Just jump in for God's sake (pun intended).*

At the same time, this dude wades forward for his turn and John turns away as if the poor guy is not even there so he can go trash talk the chief priests back behind him. And the dude has this awkward look on his face, like, *Okay, what am I supposed to do now! I'm out here and already wet. Do I wait! The crowd behind me is getting restless. What do I do?* So, he haltingly steps forward like someone in a self-service line for the first time.

By the time the dove enters the scene, Jesus is looking to the sky as if he just wants to get this thing over with. It was much worse than I remembered. There are just some bible scenes that won't translate well to film or theater. Of course, in this instance, I should give the director a break, because the story of Jesus' baptism itself is somewhat of a mystery. For one thing, if John understood who Jesus was, why wouldn't he drop everything, close up shop, and become a disciple along with Jesus' road crew? And why would Matthew a little later have this same John sending his own disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Further, if John was offering a baptism of repentance, why would Jesus, fully human, yet

without sin, come wading through the water to receive it? What is Matthew telling us here?

Such questions have been keeping bible scholars busy for centuries, and there are mysteries here that remain shrouded. Applied to both Jesus and John, we cannot offer any final answer to the Nixonian era conundrum: What exactly did John and Jesus know and when did they know it? Yet, drilling down we do discern some important points Matthew's gospel is making to us.

A prophet in the tradition of the Old Testament, as symbolized in his wardrobe and diet, John the Baptist is God's messenger pointing to truths beyond himself without fully comprehending how it will all play out. So, when Jesus appears before him for baptism, it is obvious there is something in Jesus' presence that sends John's mind to questioning about whether there could be a connection between his prophecy and Jesus' identity. Matthew says, "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'"

John may not have fully comprehended who Jesus was, but he knew enough to defer to him. Sometimes, you just know. Listen, if I'm

standing in the lane, defending the basket, and Giannis Antetokounmpo, the Greek Freak, comes barreling toward me, I don't have to know his whole story to know enough to step aside, to defer. Sometimes you just know to defer, to step aside, to pass the baton, to retreat so that the other may take the stage. There are a couple of important things going on here, one in relation to the gospel narrative and one in connection to the early Christian community to whom Matthew is writing.

In regard to the latter, the text itself reveals that even before Jesus arrives, John the Baptist has a significant following, a crowd of disciples that in pockets of the first Century church rivaled Jesus' in number. So, Matthew seeks to make abundantly clear the primacy of Jesus over John. Here, we are not talking about two teammates with comparable skills. Rather, here we have in Jesus someone playing on a whole different plain. In John the Baptist's own words, "one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals." Similarly, the apostle Paul vents about the error of divided loyalties among Christians, "Each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." 13

Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ... as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." Matthew wants to make sure the church understands that John is the messenger, but Jesus is the message. The ministries of the church erode if they do not point beyond themselves to what God has done in through and with Christ.

This relates also to a second point Matthew is highlighting in this encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus, and that is the transition from the time of preparation to the kingdom of our Lord, from the messenger to the message, from the old covenant to the new covenant. When John the Baptist says, "The kingdom of God has come near," he is pointing the people toward something. When Jesus says, "The kingdom of God has come near," they're looking at it ... in Jesus.

So, why would Jesus come forward to receive John's baptism of repentance? Scholar Tom Long observes that one reason could be that since "it is the will of God for [Jesus] to save the world, to make righteousness a reality for humanity through joining himself to sinners," "...[Jesus'] baptism by John signifies this identification with

all humanity, a symbol of his total involvement in the human condition.” (Tom Long, *Matthew*)

In addition, when the sky opens and the direct testimony of God regarding the identity of Jesus declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," we discover a truth intrinsic to our own baptism.

Now, every pastor tends over time to form their own patois or lingo to supplement the central traditional liturgy when performing a baptism. There are several moving pieces and you can't hold the child, reach for the water, and carry a script at the same time. Personally, I'm just hoping to get the name right, not trip over my robe, and keep from getting all twisted up in these crazy, puffy sleeves, or worse, this infernal microphone. What would Seinfeld say, "Oh, I'm stressed, baby!" Yet, I will say that when baptizing an adult, at least to this point, none of the adults have tried to grab my nose or take the microphone from me.

You may remember that when Katie, our former associate, would carry the child back to the parents, she would always quote 1 John 3 –

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.”

That’s a powerful sentiment. Just as Jesus was declared to be God’s Son, so too through Christ, at our baptism, we are welcomed to the household of faith as children of God. How affirming, how redeeming, how powerful it is to claim that, understand that ... Children of God ... Remember that, congregation; remember that, new elders, remember that, little ones, youth, millennials, GenX, GenY, Boomers, retirees, seniors. “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” It is why we preachers get all crazy about keeping the baptismal visible here in the sanctuary. No matter where you are in life, when you enter here look up toward the baptismal and remember who has claimed you.

A number of pastors who have a better memory than me and can do more than one thing at a time, will at baptism recite the beautiful baptismal liturgy of the French Huguenots.

For you, little child,  
 Jesus Christ has come, he has fought, he has suffered.  
 For you he entered the shadow of Gethsemane and the horror of



Calvary. For you he uttered the cry, "It is finished!"  
For you he rose from the dead  
and ascended into heaven  
and there he intercedes —  
for you, little child, even though you do not know it.  
But in this way the word of the Gospel becomes true.  
"We love him, because he first loved us."

Whenever and wherever you see a baptismal, remember that.

Thanks be to God, Amen.