

## **John 1:19-34 “Testimony of the Baptizer”**

We're taking a break from the lectionary this week in honor of Benjamin's baptismal service. I think we're supposed to be in the book of Matthew, but I chose John's gospel this week instead. The word, "gospel" literally means, "Good News," which is awesome because we Christians think that the story of Jesus is definitely good news. The good news that God is reconciling the world through the life, death and resurrection of Christ is the foundation of our faith and practice. That's the good news. That's the gospel. And the best thing about the gospel story is that we have *four* versions! Four different ways to consider the story of Jesus.

Today's gospel reading is about John the Baptizer. Some people call him "John the Baptist," but that sounds kind of weird because we might conjure up an incorrect picture of him in our modern-era minds. John the Baptist? You mean, "Big hair, powder blue seersucker suit, loud tie?" No. That's an unfair stereotype. But I did get a chuckle. Most scholars for the last 50 years or so have started calling him "John the Baptizer" because it's not about his title, it's about what he does. He's still kind of weird though. The gospel writers describe him as a hermit with camel hair clothing who wandered around in the wilderness eating wild locusts and honey. When it comes to the story of Jesus' relationship with John the Baptizer, here's what the gospels give us.

**Matthew (3:13-17)** -- Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. 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. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

**Mark (1:9-12)** – In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved with you I am well pleased.’ And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

**Luke (3:21-22)** – Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

Then there’s John. Georgeanne already read this one, and no, you heard correctly: John the Gospel Writer did not actually say that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptizer. Nor did John mention a voice from heaven saying anything about Jesus being God’s beloved son or that God was well pleased with him. Leave it to John to be the oddball of the gospel writers. So you might say, “Okay, fine, but it’s implied ... right? It’s the same event. John may not have mentioned Jesus’ baptism, but ... well ... this is clearly the *event* that the other gospel writers wrote about.” Okay, but if you look at the section headings in these nifty pew bibles we just got, the title of this event in Matthew, Mark, *and* Luke is “The Baptism of Jesus.” In all three! But what do we have in John? “The Testimony of John the Baptist,” followed by, “The Lamb of God.” Three gospels where Jesus gets baptized. One where he doesn’t. Okay, then, I guess the next logical question is, “Then why the heck are you reading out of the only gospel that *doesn’t* mention Jesus getting baptized on a day where someone is getting baptized?!” Good question.

When we talk about the reason why we baptize folks, often we’ll say, “It’s because Jesus was baptized, and if it was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for me.” And when that’s the point we’re trying to make, great ... because we’ve got three gospels in the Bible to back it up. But remember, the Bible isn’t just one book. It’s *many* books and it

took several generations for the early Christians to agree on which books should go in the collection we call, “The New Testament.” Each of these gospels were written for a different community of Christians. A lot of people want to focus on who the authors of these gospels were and they want to argue about who wrote what and when. But when you look at these books as the products of a *community* more so than a product of individual writers, that opens up all sorts of interesting discussions about how different Christian communities understood the nature of the gospel. How did they understand the good news?

John doesn’t say that Jesus was baptized! Is John the Baptizer in this gospel? Yup. Does John the gospel writer mention that baptizing is what John the Baptizer was known for? Yup. Does John the Gospel writer tell us about John the Baptizer’s testimony concerning Jesus? Yup. Even down to where he describes witnessing the Spirit of God descending on Jesus. But unlike the other gospel writers, the presence of God’s Spirit doesn’t happen as a *result* of Jesus’ baptism! When you’re doing Bible study and you run into one gospel that adds or omits something, the question becomes, “Why?” Why did John not think it was important to mention Jesus’ baptism? Which leads to, “What *did* John think was important?” That’s where we hit the jackpot.

Of the four gospel writers, John has the highest regard for Jesus’ divinity. He describes Jesus as the Word who was with God from the beginning of creation and who was made flesh to dwell among us. Furthermore, no one has ever seen God, but “It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart who has made him known.” (1:18) In other words, if you want to see and know God, here is one who *embodies* God so much, that John, and presumably John’s community of faith, refers to Jesus as “God the only Son.” Not “the only Son of God” but “God, the only Son.” Verse 19 tells us that the Jewish leaders at that time were curious about John the Baptizer. There were rumors going around that maybe he was the Messiah, so they sent some priests and religious experts out in the wilderness to check out this camel-hair-wearing, locust eating, water-obsessed prophet. Keep in mind, also, that when we

consider other non-biblical sources from this time period, John wasn't the only wandering renegade Jewish prophet out in the desert preaching about the coming of God's Kingdom. The "mainstream" Jewish leaders were probably accustomed to going out to different parts of the country to check out potential Messiahs. But when they got to John the Baptizer, they discovered that even though he was out wandering in the desert baptizing people, he wasn't claiming to be any kind of Messiah. In fact, he said that he was called to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy about the one who would be a voice crying out in the wilderness "Make straight the way of the Lord." The priests said, "Okay, then why the heck are you out here baptizing people if you don't even consider yourself a prophet let alone a Messiah? What's the point?" John said, "Good question. See, I'm just a guy who baptizes with water. There's one coming after me whose sandals I'm not even worthy of untying."

That must have confused the priests. But lo and behold the next day here comes Jesus. That's when John said, "Here's the one who I was talking about. The Lamb of God who has come to take the sin of the world." No mention of why Jesus came to him. He just came and John announced that he saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove on Jesus. Then he said, "Again, I'm just a guy who baptizes with water. This one on whom the Spirit rests? He will baptize with the Holy Spirit."

So here's what I think John the Gospel writer is trying to say – It wasn't *necessary* for John the Baptizer to baptize Jesus. It wasn't a requirement. Jesus didn't *need* this baptism in order to kick off his ministry. The other gospel writers thought his baptism *was* important. They also made it clear that the Holy Spirit was present and rested on Jesus, and they associated the act of baptism with the presence of God's spirit resting on Jesus. John didn't. I think John the Gospel writer wanted to make it clear that the most important baptism a person can receive is the one Jesus offered: A baptism of the Holy Spirit. Does that mean I think that John or his community of faith *didn't* practice baptism? No. I'm just saying that they wanted to make it abundantly clear that the best thing that can come out of baptism isn't getting wet ...

it's about receiving the Spirit of God so that the one who is baptized can be equipped to go into the world to live out the mission and ministry of God by confessing and following Jesus. That's just one component of the many reasons why we practice baptism in our church. We take a page from Paul's letters when he compares the act of baptism to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. When we bury our old selves in the waters of baptism, we come up out of the waters as new creatures in Christ. We take a page from the book of Acts and recognize baptism as an act of repentance where the waters symbolically wash our sins away.

What all of these models of baptism have in common, though, is the idea that we are receiving the Holy Spirit to guide us through a journey of faith that is unlike the journey we were on before we decided to follow Jesus. It symbolizes a change in the way we see the world. It symbolizes a change in behavior. It symbolizes a change of both heart and mind. That's why I'm wearing my Pentecost stole today. These changes come about when open ourselves up to receiving the Spirit of the Living God as Benjamin has done today in these baptismal waters.