

Isaiah 42: 1-9, Matthew 3: 13-17

“A Visible Sign of an Invisible Grace”

Well into her teenage years, my daughter who grew up in NYC always wanted to put the Christmas tree up as early as possible and take it down as late as possible. Come the day after Thanksgiving, she goes “Daddy, daddy, can we get the tree today?” The “Daddy” wanted to wait as late as he could to bring in the tree from the street corner vendor and take it down as soon as he could, citing the mess the falling pine needles make in our small NYC apartment. They would triangulate me into their tug of war, and I, the theologian in residence, defer to the liturgical season for the reason: Christmas tree shall be seen “not a day sooner than the first Sunday of Advent and not a day past Epiphany.”

We, the church folks are good at following the liturgical year, swiftly shifting gears from one season to the next, unpacking and packing up the season back into the Christmas Closet for another year. (By the way, there’s a wreath on the door that we missed!) After we have sung Christmas carols to our hearts’ content, after much buying and exchanging of presents, and cooking and eating, or having a nasty illness put damper on all that, we may be feeling relieved to have turned the page onto to the new year, and liturgically, return to the “ordinary time.”

But there may be a deeper truth to that child-like unwillingness to put away Christmas quite so fast. For us, the Church, the new year dawned at Advent when we anticipated the coming of the Messiah, and with the birth of Jesus in our midst on Christmas, God entered into the flesh and blood life of humanity; the kingdom of God broke into our broken world. Something shifted forever.

And the story of this Jesus, our Immanuel, God with Us, continues to unfold before us in the Scripture and through our very lives by the power of the holy spirit. Our story, the stories of

your life and of mine, are somehow joined in with His story. In today's Gospel reading about the baptism of Jesus, the writer of the Matthew's Gospel shows us how that might be.

Just as we followed the Gospel of Luke on our journey with Jesus, we have Matthew as our guide this year. Matthew does not follow the same route or always choose the same events as Luke did, but he tells his story in a unique way to show how the story of God is one continuous, unfolding story, according to God's plan, from the beginning of Creation, through the history of Israel with their kings and prophets, and the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus, all the way down to our lives as the people of God. All in One.

So, this first Sunday after the Christmas season, as the world turns to the first page of the 2023 Calendar, we turn only a few pages in our Bible to a new chapter in Matthew's Gospel. From where we left the baby Jesus in swaddling cloth, fast forward 30 or so years and we meet Jesus as a grown man, coming to John the Baptist to be baptized by him.

The word "baptize" comes from the Greek word "baptizou" which means to "bathe," or to wash something by immersing or dipping in water. Dipping people in the river was not something the old-time prophets were known to do, but there was a Jewish tradition of ritual bathing called "mikveh."

In mikveh, one bathed to purify oneself ritually before entering the temple, and it was a regular practice the Jews had done for generations. But the King Herod, the puppet of the Roman empire, built a mikveh that looked just like a Roman bath outside the Temple. Now, it wouldn't feel very clean to wash yourself in the bath fashioned after the bath of your oppressors who served other gods. It kind of defeated the purpose.

Against this cultural backdrop, John the Baptist offered another venue to get clean for God: the Jordan River, the river that had witnessed the rise and fall of the people of Israel for

generations. With John, it was no longer just a ritual bathing. Dipping them in that river, he urged them to come clean for God, to confess their sins and change their ways, for real.

Then came Jesus to the Jordan river to be baptized by John. Matthew is the only Gospel that includes the conversation between John and Jesus. John recognizes he is not in a position to baptize Jesus, telling him to repent and change his ways. But Jesus says, “allow it to happen, so we can fulfill all righteousness.” In other words, “we need to do it so what God intends can come to pass.”

And so, Jesus was baptized by John, and when he emerged from the water, a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” These words echo the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.” Jesus, by joining all the others in getting baptized, Jesus submitted to God’s plan as God’s servant; through his baptism, Jesus offered himself to be used for God’s unfolding purpose. It marked the beginning of his ministry.

Matthew saw how God’s grand plan was unfolding in Jesus from before his birth. Now, when I try to explain something, my friends who know me well would interrupt me and say, “you don’t need to go back to Adam and Eve, just tell us the point.” Well, Matthew didn’t go back quite to Adam and Eve, but he did go back to Abraham and Sarah. Before telling us how the story about Jesus’s birth, Matthew begins his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus all the way back to Abraham, the father of all nations by the promise of God.

Emerging out of this long genealogy going back to the father of all nations, Jesus is firmly linked to the story of God’s people Israel, bound up with peoples of foreign lands, the rest of humanity. So, when Jesus came to the Jordan River to be baptized, he was bearing upon himself all that went before him, the failures, the inadequacies, the brokenness of Israel, and

plunge into the water of baptism to washed it all away. And it was not only the past. As Jesus said, he was doing this “to fulfill all righteousness,” the full span of God’s saving purpose and that includes you and me and all who will follow us.

Jesus went down into the water of Jordan, joining himself with all of our “lack,” and came out of the water to be declared God’s Beloved, for God sent Jesus for this purpose of being among us. When he went down into that water of Jordan River, he took the entire humanity with him and was raised from the water with all of us. When we are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we too are joined with Jesus in baptism, and we too are claimed as God’s own. And it is all part of God’s plan; it is all God’s action and God’s grace.

Baptism in the reformed Christian tradition is one of the only 2 Sacraments, the other one being the Lord’s Supper. What do we mean by sacrament? I love this expression: “a visible sign of an invisible grace.” It reminds us it is not about our action but God’s. It is a visible sign of an invisible reality that already exists. Just as the Lord’s Supper is a sign of our union with Christ who offered himself to live through us, Baptism is a sign of God’s loving us and claiming us as God’s children. Our getting baptized doesn’t cause God to accept us as God’s children, as if God couldn’t claim us until *we* let ourselves be baptized: that would be a tragedy, not a Good News. God loves us and claims us before we can even respond, but in our baptism, we get to respond to God’s already and ever-present grace by saying Yes to God.

As Jesus’s baptism was his act of submission to God’ plan, which he continued to live out throughout his life on earth, our baptism, too, is a commission to live our lives in service of God’s plan for the world.

40+ years ago, I spent my last Christmas in my home country of Japan, for I was coming to America to study the following spring. I was always in awe of those who had a dramatic

conversion experience because I didn't have one event that stood out like that; I just grew up believing I was a child of God as my church taught me.

But I hadn't been baptized as a baby, because my father wasn't a Christian, and so my mother was eager to see me "claimed" by God in baptism in the church before I literally "flew away" from her to a faraway country. So, she asked that I get baptized that Christmas. I knew I had a faith and trusted God was always there to protect me and help me. So, I said yes, and I was baptized at age 15.

Shortly after that, I can't tell exactly when because there still wasn't any big bang moment, but at one point, somehow it dawned on me that my understanding of faith was up-side-down. I had always thought that God was there to help me in times of my needs, cheering me on as if God were my personal cheerleader, but sometime after I was baptized, I saw that I had it backwards: the truth was I existed, I lived, to serve God.

That was a complete change in my thinking, a revelation, a transformation, and a conversion. I didn't figure it out; it was revealed to me; it was the work of the Spirit. And here I am. In Baptism, God does not just claim us but claims us for a purpose, which unfolds before us throughout our lives as we follow Christ. Baptism is not the goal of a Christian life; it's only a beginning.

Such is the new life into which we all are called in our baptism: a life with a mission, purpose and meaning that serves God's saving plan bigger than any one of us can imagine, through the Church that is his body. And the Spirit that came alighting on Jesus comes to us, too, so as to bless us with an abiding joy in carrying on Christ's mission as our own.