

## **“Baptism Memories”**

### **Matthew 3:13-17**

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It could have been the snake that floated by me in the Elkhorn Creek, the candidate that came up from the water shouting for joy or the boy that did the breast stroke leaving the baptismal pool. I have a lot of baptismal memories that will stick with me forever. Most of them are not as dramatic as these, but still memorable.

I doubt that John the Baptist had trouble recalling his most memorable baptismal experience. It had to be the day he looked up and saw Jesus in line to be baptized. Surely he did a double take and could hardly believe what he saw. So taken back was John that when it came time for Jesus to be baptized, he tried to talk him out of it. Jesus would hear none of this and instructed John to baptize him just as he baptized everyone else. When John did, according to Matthew's poetic description, the heavens opened, a dove descended upon Jesus and a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” Matthew 3:17.

All of this leads to a question that has been debated for generations. **Why was Jesus baptized?** Barbara Brown Taylor states that the Christian church has never been comfortable with Jesus' baptism. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. For what did Jesus need to be forgiven? We know of nothing.

**So, why was Jesus baptized?** Some will tell you that he was baptized to set an example for his followers, showing them what he wanted them to do. Wouldn't it make more sense for him to baptize John if this were the case? I think so.

Others believe that Jesus' baptism was a commissioning service. He was changing careers from carpentry to clergy and this was his divine blessing.

Some scholars believe that Jesus was responding to John's prophetic call to pursue justice in a broken world. He, like many others, became John's disciple and along that journey found his own voice and unique purpose.

Matthew writes that Jesus was baptized in order to “fulfill all righteousness.” Righteousness, obedience to God's revealed will, is one of Matthew's key themes. God wanted Jesus to be baptized and Jesus complied with unquestioning obedience.

As you can see, several reasons for Jesus' baptism have been proposed by serious students of our faith. Perhaps you have weighed in on this discussion in Sunday school or Bible study.

What is less debatable is what Jesus' baptism communicated to his peers. **What message did his baptism send to his neighbors, even in retrospect as they thought about this event after Jesus' death and resurrection?** People of faith need to be humble and compassionate, not arrogant and aloof like many of the religious leaders of that day.

Speaking of the religious leaders, where were they in this scene? Were they in the water waiting their turn to be baptized? Absolutely not. They were standing on the shore at a safe distance monitoring what was happening.

Why? Evidently they did not feel the need to be baptized and did not want to be associated with sinners, which would have soiled their reputation. You get the feeling they were above all of this and did not approve. You also come to the conclusion that Isaiah's image of religious leaders as suffering servants never registered with them.

Do you know how easy it would have been for Jesus to have adopted their attitude and strategy? After all, these were his role models. Even if he wanted to get closer to the people than they were, he could have made it known that he did not need to be baptized but helped those that did as they entered and exited the water, offering words of encouragement. All of this would have

been accepted and understood. But he did not do this. Instead, he took his place in line, blended in with the crowd and submitted to John's baptism. Why?

Do you recall what Matthew wrote about Jesus in his birth narrative? "He will be called Immanuel, which means 'God with us' " Matthew 1:13. Could it be that Jesus wanted to reveal that God really was with His people? As God's representative, he was willing to get wet, dirty and down on their level. He would walk in their shoes and enter into their struggles. He would feel their remorse over sin and desire for new beginnings. He would hear their cries for hope and help. Why? Because the God he called Father did and it was his mission to reveal this.

Evidently this touched God's heart and led Him to proudly proclaim, "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

By the way, about whom was that not said that day? You know, don't you? It was the Pharisees and Sadducees standing on the distant shore.

**Would you like to hear these affirming and encouraging words from God?** I think we all would and I believe we can. How? Get wet. Get dirty. Get down where your neighbors are and walk in their shoes. Rub shoulders with those crying out for hope and enter into their struggles. Share their dreams for a better life and world. Become God's partner in hope and take advantage of every opportunity to make it visible. Encourage and help others along their journey and when you do, somewhere along the way, you will hear those memorable words, "This is my beloved in whom I am well pleased."

