

Into the River with the Rest of Us
Matthew 3:1-17

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We celebrate the Baptism of the Lord on the first Sunday after Christmastide every year. We find it yearly in our lectionary. All four gospels mention it. It is obviously a supremely important event in the life of Jesus and in the story of our salvation.

John, dressed in camel's hair and a leather belt evoking the image of the prophet Elijah, is baptizing scores of people in the Jordan River. From the villages and towns of Judea, and even from Jerusalem, people came way out into the wilderness to hear John preach and then go into the Jordan River as a sign of cleansing from sin, a commitment to change their ways, and a renewal of their covenant with God. The people who came out to hear John and ended up being baptized were sinful people. They had lost hope in the religious establishment and had come as a last ditch effort to make things right with God and with others. Many were probably common criminals. Some sinned only in their hearts, but they came knowing they were sinful and wanting to be cleansed. They all knew they were not holy and certainly not worthy. They all came hoping against hope for the mercy of God.

According to Scripture, Jesus traveled all the way out into the Judean wilderness to see and hear his cousin John. And when the time came to be baptized, Jesus got into the river just like everyone else. Why? He was not a sinner. He did not need to repent. Jesus could have been kind to sinners, confirming John's message, and even taken over as the baptizer. His baptism could have caused quite a scandal. Did he have a secret sin? Was he really the One, the Messiah? If so, why would he get into the river with all those sinners and risk being confused as one?

As a senior in college, I did an internship at a Washington-Lee High School in Arlington, Virginia, serving as part time school nurse and part time athletic trainer for the JV football team. Walking the halls during the day, because of my height and my looks, I was often asked if I had a hall pass and once even sent to the principal's office. I had to explain over and over again that I was not in high school, that I was an employee of the school, that I was not "one of them." I desperately did not want to be confused as one of them. I was older, wiser, far beyond their stage in life. Don't get me wrong – I loved working there and being with those students. I just didn't want to be one of them. No one wants to be confused with someone they consider less important, less advanced, or less worthy. Yet we find Jesus, the Son of God, wanting to be one of us, refusing to separate

himself from us, getting into the river with the rest of us. Why would he do that?

I believe there are three good reasons why God in Jesus Christ got into the river with the rest of us. The first is this: **Jesus did not want us to be alone.** What Jesus did on that day out in the wilderness is much like what Sergeant Gary Goulet of the Edmonton Police Service did in June 1994. He met Lyle Jorgenson, a 5-year-old boy who had cancer. Goulet requested the meeting after learning that Lyle was being ridiculed at school because of his hair loss due to chemotherapy.

Goulet was so moved by the boy's story that he decided to do something. His head was already shaved, so he asked Lyle to have his picture taken with him in a police cruiser. Goulet then gathered a group of Edmonton officers who were willing to shave their own heads and they joined the boy in school to show kids that being bald was cool. Goulet and his colleagues became like one who had cancer, even though they didn't have cancer, so that Kyle would not be alone.

Jesus became one of us, even though he was not sinful or finite, so that we wouldn't be alone. He went into the river with us, the river of human birth, of childhood, of baptism, of feasts and fasts, of joy and of sorrow, of calm and conflict, of betrayal and suffering and even death, so that we would never be alone in those things. Jesus Christ is in there with us today as much as he was in the wilderness. He joins us where we are, no matter how low or high, how prestigious or humble, how holy or how sinful a state we are in. He promised it. "Remember I am with you always," Jesus said, "even to the close of the age." (Matthew 28:20).

Secondly, **Jesus got into the river with the rest of us to show us we need God's love.** As soon as Jesus came up out water, he heard a voice from heaven saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Jesus began his earthly ministry with an affirmation of the love of God His Father. He needed this heavenly affirmation to begin his earthly ministry, and if Jesus needed it, how much more do we need to be reminded that we too are loved by God?

The world is full of people who don't know that their Creator is really their Father, Lover, and biggest fan. Because they don't know it, they look for that love in all the wrong places. Many people spend their whole lives trying to prove they are acceptable and lovable because they are rich, smart, strong, young looking, or well behaved. Baptism by John was a great equalizer, for it included everybody: young and old, rich and poor, religious and estranged from the faith, big sinners, and little ones, and of course Jesus. Everybody that goes into the water to receive the mercy of God hears, in all

God's goodness and grace, "You are my child, my Beloved. In you I am well pleased."

Karl Barth, the great reformed theologian of the 20th Century, was lecturing at the University of Chicago. The President of the University asked him, "Of all the theological insights you have ever had, which do you consider the greatest of them all?" Karl Barth closed his eyes and thought for a while. Then he smiled, opened his eyes and responded, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

The church of Jesus Christ must get this message out to a world that feels unloved, judged, and abandoned. We need it. We need to hear it, over, and over, and over again. God loves you. God loves you. Frederick Buechner tells of walking down the street in New York City, and as he quickly passed a woman, she said "Jesus loves you." At first he found it very strange and very simplistic compared to his insight into the mind of God. But he reports that thought stayed with him all day and continually brought a smile to his face. It is the very beginning of faith: a firm and certain knowledge of the love of God for us and we can go nowhere without it. Don't let a day go by without a reminder of how much God loves you.

And last, but certainly not least, **Jesus got into the river with the rest of us to show us we need the Holy Spirit.** Jesus saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. The Spirit came to Jesus to be a companion, a guide, and a helper. Jesus never did anything without the leading and the power of God's Spirit in him. Jesus had to have the strength, the peace, the power, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to carry out his mission.

We too must have the strength, the peace, the power, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to carry out our mission on earth. The Spirit comes to us to be our companion, guide, and help along the way. Why do we think we don't need the help and power of the Spirit when Jesus did?

The Holy Spirit opens our eyes, makes our hearts aware and quickens our minds to what God is doing. The Holy Spirit comes and speaks peace and truth to us. The Holy Spirit gives us the gifts and the power to do what God calls us to do, just as the Spirit did for Jesus.

It's hard for some people to believe they have this power. It seems a rather awesome task to remember that we have this power. The Spirit is hard to pin down, to get a handle on, especially for Presbyterians. Metaphors in Scripture that help us understand just Who the Spirit is and what the Spirit is able to accomplish are the word pictures of fire, wind, and water. Jaime Potter-Miller recalls when she was on a visit to the then Soviet Union, and was invited to preach and sing before a bursting-at-the-seams

Soviet Methodist congregation. In order to make her way across the crowded meeting hall to sing her solo, Miller had to exit the building to re-enter it on the correct side. Outside the church door she ran into a young man, who introduced himself as Patrick.

Miller says, "I invited him to come in, but he shook his head. 'You are a believer?' he asked me. I nodded. The vodka on his breath stung my eyes. His jacket revealed red flag pins embossed with the face of Vladimir Lenin. If he was not a Communist, he certainly wanted to look like one. In excellent English he spit out the words, 'You are a believer! Show me your Holy Spirit! I cannot believe what I cannot see! Where is it? What does it look like? Where can I touch it? It's all a fantasy! A child's game!' I took his hand and led him to the door.... I said, 'Patrick, I will show you the Holy Spirit if you will show me the wind.' We watched out on the street as blossoms and leaves blew around. Flags flapped and babushka'd women left a trail of fringe. He began to describe what he was seeing. I said, 'No, Patrick, you're telling what the wind does. Show me the wind. For I too can show you what the Holy Spirit does, but I cannot show you the Spirit anymore than you can show me the wind.'ⁱ

Even though we cannot see the Spirit, we see the evidence of that power in the life of Jesus. We see the Spirit in Christ as he taught, healed, exorcised, welcomed, corrected, judged, saved, fellowshiped and loved those with whom he came in contact.

Can we see the evidence in our own lives of the Spirit's power? Can we see evidence in our church of the Spirit's power? When was the last time something totally unexpected happened? How long has it been since you were full of peace? Do we know of any healing or prophetic judgment today? How about a life saved, changed for the better? Is there supernatural love and inclusion in our midst? Jesus got into the river with the rest of us to receive this power and to show us that we all need the Holy Spirit.

If you have never responded to John the Baptist's preaching and gone into river, I encourage you to take that step. Come and receive the cleansing, mercy, and forgiveness of the Lord. If you have, don't ever forget that you are not alone, you are loved beyond measure, and you have a tremendous power in you that will help and guide you wherever you may go. We know all this because out there in the wilderness of Judea, at the hand of his crazy cousin John, Jesus got into the river with the rest of us.

ⁱ Jaime Potter-Miller, "A Question of Questions," Circuit Rider, May 1992, 16-17.