

Matthew 3: 13-17 A Conversation by the Jordan

As we follow the lectionary through the story of Jesus' life and ministry we have three accounts which share the same content so completely that they can be laid out in a parallel format. There are some differences in their place in the gospel, but the verses echo one another almost one for one. Then there is the fourth account which is very different, that is the Gospel according to John. There are not many events which occur in all four, but when they do, it is a strong indication that they contain information that was very important to those early believers and to us. One of those encounters which is described in all four of the gospel accounts is the encounter of Jesus with John the Baptist at the river Jordan. Each gospel presents the encounter with slightly different details or from a slightly different perspective. This encounter represents the first appearance of Jesus as an adult, just at the beginning of his ministry. This encounter always forms the topic for the first Sunday after Epiphany and is designated as Baptism of the Lord Sunday on our calendars. Within John's gospel, John the Baptist who had attracted the notice of the religious authorities in Jerusalem is questioned about the baptisms he is doing. He self-identifies as the one sent to prepare the way of the Lord. He is that voice crying out in the wilderness spoken of by Isaiah, but he is neither Elijah nor the Messiah. After proclaiming his role in the unfolding story, the next day when he sees Jesus approaching where he is baptizing by the river Jordan, he declares: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Although the text does not actually relate a baptism of Jesus, John does testify to seeing the Spirit descend and remain with Jesus who is the Son of God. Even with its very different orientation, the crucial elements of the narrative are there: John the Baptist by the river Jordan is the one sent to prepare the way for the one greater than himself; the Spirit descending upon Jesus; and the identification of Jesus as the Son of God. The descriptions of this encounter in Matthew, Mark and Luke are more similar but not identical with each other. All three use the proclamations of John the Baptist to repent as the introduction to the adult Jesus. John in each of these gospels is at the river Jordan, baptizing those who answer the call to repentance by confessing their sin. He is described in all three as the one who has been chosen to prepare the way of the Lord, predicting that the day of the Lord is coming soon with the appearance of the anointed one; the Messiah. The next point of agreement in all the accounts is that Jesus comes to John the Baptist at the River Jordan. Mark's description is very brief—3 verses. Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan and as he was coming up from the river, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descended upon him like a dove while a voice from heaven declared: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Luke's description is almost identical to this, only changing it to say when Jesus was baptized and was praying, the heavens opened up while the Spirit descended like a dove and the voice from heaven identified Jesus as the beloved Son who pleased God. Again it only takes three verses to relate Jesus' baptism and except for the additional comment out the praying, this is easily taken as a public and obvious declaration by God that Jesus is the anointed one whose arrival John has been sent to announce. As I have pointed out, at his baptism Jesus is given an identity card through an appearance of the Holy Spirit. This claim is of fundamental importance to the understanding of who Jesus was and is. This holds true for both the disciples and early believers but also for us. In the description of the event through the eyes of Matthew we find

an additional point being made. Neither Mark nor Luke raises the issue that Matthew does when John the Baptist, recognizing who Jesus is before the Holy Spirit descends has a conversation with Jesus. “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?” This is a question which has resonated throughout Christian history. Why would Jesus, the Son of God, who was sinless, need to be baptized by someone? John understands that Jesus is the anticipated anointed one whose sandals he is not fit to tie according to Mark 1:7. “But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented.” For a long time this response did not make much sense to me. It evidently made sense to John the Baptist, for he no longer objected, but consented and baptized Jesus. The image that finally came to me that helps me with this issue of the Lord seeking baptism it found in stepping back and creating a scene in my mind. Matthew tells us in his introduction of John the Baptist there the scene at the river Jordan was crowded. “Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan.” (Matthew 3:5), including many Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 3:7). When we typically think of the baptism, we just picture John and Jesus. But Matthew tells us there were large crowds there. Jesus is there among them. The one who has come to redeem humanity and offer forgiveness of sin stands there among that sinful crowd. The one who is sinless stands in line with those who are repenting and seeking to be cleansed. He is truly Emmanuel: God with us—and he is standing with humanity. It is only in Matthew that we have this exchange between John who understands his role to point to the one greater than he. John the Baptist believes that Jesus should be the one baptizing him. But Jesus says no to that so that all righteousness be fulfilled. What does that mean: that all righteousness be fulfilled. It is a statement that all should be done according to the will of God. Jesus is to stand on the bank of the Jordan aligned with sinners. The one who is pure and holy gets in line with the dirty and sinful...he crosses the Jordan in the opposite direction of those in line with him who are seeking to be cleansed. When Jesus comes up out of those waters, the heavens open and God announces how pleased he is with his beloved Son. Jesus has accepted the role God wishes for him to fulfill. He has come to stand with humanity and redeem us all. Thanks be to God.