

Foundations

If you were asked to give or explain the foundation of your faith to someone, what you say? What words would you use, especially to someone who was not familiar with the vocabulary, with those words which form our customary speech about faith? You see, we often immediately leave our celebrations of the arrival of the infant Jesus when we are coming immediately to the description of the adult Jesus at the Jordan that we are already equipped with all the history of what the narrative has to tell us about this man and his mission on earth. We already know everything we will hear in the coming months as we listen to the gospel story again. For us, the narrative is not new at all, but very familiar, no matter which gospel narrative is read. We don't think about how it must have been for those first believers—yes, they knew either Jesus, the man, or perhaps one of the disciples who had walked with him. They knew about a man who had lived among them, and who had done things that “normal” men did not do...but how did they come to understand the meaning of what they had witnessed or what was being told to them? Most of those whom Jesus had gathered around him had a certain heritage in common—they were of Jewish descent. They were seeking the promised Messiah that God had promised would come and redeem them. As we began this third chapter of Matthew's gospel account of Jesus' life, it is with the appearance of the one known as John the Baptizer in the wilderness of Judea. His appearance and proclamation is drawing the people from Jerusalem and all Judea to come to hear his message which was: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Matthew's commentary on this is that John's role is that which has been foretold by the prophet Isaiah; the role of preparing the way of the Lord. In this text from Matthew we can see one expectation of what the kingdom's coming near will mean. Matthew tells us “many Pharisees and Sadducees” come to him for baptism as well. John does not welcome them, but calls them a brood of vipers, warning them to flee from the wrath to come. John calls for them to repent, but their repentance must bear “good fruit”. John continues with the prediction that judgment is near, and that the baptism that is coming will be with the Holy Spirit and fire; wheat will be gathered and chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire. It is into this expectation of coming judgment by the Messiah that Jesus come to the Jordan and asks John to baptize him. And it is only in Matthew that we have this conversation: “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?” Over the years, Christians have raised questions about this. Not the least was the issue of “sin” itself. John's baptism was for repentance for the forgiveness of sins of which Jesus had none, so why would Jesus come to be baptized? However, that is not the question which John himself raises. John recognizes Jesus as the one who is more powerful who is coming, the one who he feels he is not worthy to carry his sandals. John feels he is in need of the baptism which Jesus can offer, the one which prepares the way for messianic judgment that establishes God's righteousness. John wants to move into judgment. Jesus' response picks up on precisely on that theme of righteousness, but perhaps not in the way that John intended. “But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” It is interesting in this response that Jesus indicates that his baptism was a joint affair. John needed to consent. “For it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Righteousness here, like earlier when applied to Joseph's decision about Mary, it is obedience to God's plan that is considered righteousness, so this baptism for the repentance for the forgiveness of sins was part of God's plan and need to be done. That Jesus' baptism is essential and a step of righteousness is confirmed by the divine voice. "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.'" God's approval is unequivocal. Jesus is reaffirmed as God's child as he begins his journey to the cross. In submitting to the baptism of sinners, Jesus takes his stand with sinners and begins the reconciliation that the journey to the cross represents. And Jesus begins a ministry which will indeed redeem the people, but not in the way that John and others expected. So as the journey which was Jesus' life and ministry among us continued, the journey which led to the cross and beyond, those who believed had to try to understand what they witnessed. They had good news to share, but how did they share it? What was the basis...the foundation for their good news? Those of the Jewish traditions had their traditions and their narratives about men sent by God who had done things "normal" men did not do. Other men of God, prophets of old had healed, had fed many from little...these were recorded in their scriptures. There were also promises made about the Messiah, the anointed one, but those which had envisioned a conquering king had been the ones remembered and lifted up. But it seemed that the redemption arrived in a way they did not expect, so they reached into their traditions for the base, for the framework, for the foundation of the narrative that they would need to understand what they had witnessed. And so the early believers spent much time with the scroll of Isaiah. In that scroll they found the descriptions of the suffering servant, a description which seemed very apt for Christ. The early believers did not call themselves Christians, but called themselves followers of The Way where Way was capitalized and understood to be the Way of Christ—as they felt called to follow him. In the earliest documents it was understood that there were two ways, the way of the righteous and obedience to God's will and that other way. Christ was the one who most clearly showed them the way of obedience, but they looked to all the previous teachings which Jesus had also lifted for them to help them. These things formed the framework for the gospel writers. That is why sometimes it is helpful for us to also take a look at these texts. Isaiah 42: 1—"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth." The Lord tells Isaiah that his chosen servants will faithfully seek to bring forth justice and not grow weary in the effort until it has been accomplished. Isaiah 42:6—"I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." This was spoken long ago to people the Lord claimed, but we are also people the Lord has claimed, we too have been given a covenant and a light. We have been called to witness to that light, to bring follow the way given to us. We have a pretty solid foundation that has been built over many years. We have a couple of

hymns in each of our hymnals which use the word foundation. Christ is Made the Sure Foundation and The Church's One Foundation. Christ and his ways are truly our foundation, but the roots of that foundation go deeper based on his identity that was shown as recorded in the events at the Jordan River. Our foundation is in our Triune God. And what we often forget is found in what Peter discovered when the Spirit began moving among the disciples after Christ's ascension. That "aha moment" is recorded in Acts 10: 34-35—"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." We often point out how many passages in Scripture God's voice is speaking out in favor of the poor, the marginalized, the victim, etc. and say that God favors them. Actually, God shows no partiality—God is seeking to undo the harm our partiality has created. God seeks justice. God calls us to love and to also follow in obedience the ways of Emmanuel—God with Us for those ways are our foundation. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.