

**“Given as a Light to the Nations”**  
**Matthew 3:13-17; Isaiah 42:1-9**  
**Baptism of the Lord**

**Isaiah 42:1-9**

<sup>1</sup>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.

<sup>2</sup>He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; <sup>3</sup>a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. <sup>4</sup>He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

<sup>5</sup>Thus says God, the LORD,  
who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people upon it  
and spirit to those who walk in it:

<sup>6</sup>I am the LORD,  
I have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations,  
<sup>7</sup>to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

<sup>8</sup>I am the LORD, that is my name;  
my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.

<sup>9</sup>See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

**Matthew 3:13-17**

<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus came from Galilee  
to John at the Jordan,  
to be baptized by him.

<sup>14</sup>John would have prevented him, saying,  
“I need to be baptized by you,  
and do you come to me?”

<sup>15</sup>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.

<sup>16</sup>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.

<sup>17</sup>And a voice from heaven said,  
“This is my Son, the Beloved,  
with whom I am well pleased.”

The Sermon

We can only imagine the look on the face of John the Baptist.

He said to Jesus, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

And when Jesus responded to him, I wonder if the look in John's eyes changed gradually from uncomprehending to almost-comprehending.

Or maybe in a few seconds of silence after Jesus answered him, John's expression transformed from the initial, overjoyed enthusiasm at the arrival of his cousin to a sudden wisdom about what this moment would mean for both of them, and how their earthly lives and ministries would culminate on the way to bringing the urgent good news to a hungry and violent world.

"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

And Jesus said: "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

We do this, in other words, because our doing it is how this whole thing works.

This is the commissioning of Jesus' ministry in Matthew's gospel.

In *Mark's* gospel, some religious big shots will, one day not too far in the future, notice that some of Jesus' disciples are eating without having gone through the traditional ritual of hand washing, and the Pharisees will ask Jesus:

"Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands that we classify as defiled?"

And Jesus will say:

"Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites:  
'This people honors me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me...'

“You abandon the commandment of *God* and hold to *human* tradition”  
(Mark 7:1-8).

Why do my disciples not respect a tradition that classifies some people’s hands as defiled? We do this because our doing it is part of how the whole thing works.

According to John’s gospel, as the disciples are gathered together for the Last Supper, and Jesus is coming around to wash each disciple’s feet, Peter will ask, “Lord, are *you* going to wash *my* feet?” *I* should be washing *your* feet.

And Jesus will say: “You don’t know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

And Peter will say, “You will never wash my feet.”

And Jesus will say back: “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me” (John 13:5-8).

We do this because our doing it is how this works.

In Luke’s gospel, some scribes and Pharisees will ask Jesus’ disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

And Jesus will say: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:30-32).

We do this because our doing it is how the whole thing works.

But before all of that: according to Matthew, Jesus stands with John at the River Jordan, having come specifically for John to baptize him, and John is saying:

“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

We do it this way, because this is how the whole thing works.

It’s a necessary part of what Jesus has come to be and to do.

“Here is my servant,” God said through Isaiah. “I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”

And since all of us who are baptized are baptized with Jesus, in some sense, what *we* are here to be and do is part of what he is here to be and do.

“I have given you as a covenant to the people,” says Isaiah 42, “a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

What do you suppose that means for the Church, for all of Christendom, for all people of faith?

And what does it mean for you?

Specifically, in a world of darkness and blindness and dungeons—a world where despair and hopelessness and addiction and apathetic numbness are so much a part of so many lives—what do you imagine God has brought you here to be, and to do?

According to Ephesians, God chose you before the foundation of the world. The Greek word for “world” in that sentence is “*kosmos*.” God chose you before anything we know about this universe existed.

And apparently, having waited more than 13 billion years for just the right time, God brought you into being in a specific time and place and context and circumstance.

What has God used in your life to shape who you are?

Your family, your upbringing, where you came from, what your earliest days looked and felt like, and how you grew—that period from childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood that, in Jesus' life is almost totally missing from everything we know about him—

how has God used all of that part of your life, or how is God using that part of your life, to shape you into someone who has been given as a light to the world?

Your passions and your interests and your disposition; the ways you relate to people; the things you think about yourself and how you identify yourself...

If someone you never met sat down with you and said, "I want to know you. Who are you?"—

If you were asked to indicate what you are most comfortable thinking of as your identity, in one sentence or less, what would you say?

You and your life are gifts that God is giving to the world.

You and God create that gift together every day.

You were, and are, given as a light to the world.

Love one another.

Turn the other cheek.

Feed my lambs.

Tend my sheep.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Love your enemies.

"Love one another just as I have loved you."

Feed my sheep.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

We do this because our doing it is how this whole thing works.

If you are not baptized, but are considering it, what do you think about what it is that you would be baptized into?

And if you are baptized, what does your baptism mean to you, and what you choose to do with your life?

“Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

And when Jesus had been baptized, as he came up from the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and landed lightly on him.

And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

May God be well pleased with all of us, whom Jesus is not ashamed to call siblings,<sup>i</sup> as, with God’s help, we live into the same baptism that he received at the strong and quaking hands of John the Baptist.

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<sup>i</sup> Hebrews 2:11