

WHY JESUS NEEDED TO BE BAPTIZED

Scriptures: Matthew 3:13-17; 1-12

Next month I am doing a class here at our church on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights called “The Theology of Calvin... and Hobbes.” You can sign up for it on the green insert in the bulletin. Here is a sneak preview. In one comic strip I saved that appeared just after New Years, Calvin says to his pet tiger Hobbes, “Everybody makes the wrong kind of New Year’s Resolution. All they do is promise to stop bad habits and start good habits.” Hobbes says, “What’s wrong with that?” Calvin says, “It’s not enough to change a few little habits! Everybody I know needs a complete personality overhaul.” He goes on, “That’s why I’ll be spending the remaining days of this year telling people what I hate about them and how they should change.” Hobbes says, “Some of us would be happy to reciprocate.”

Calvin reminds me of John the Baptist. “In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’” To repent means literally to turn your life around, to change the whole direction you are headed. According to John the Baptist, it’s not enough to change a few little habits. You need a complete personality overhaul. All of you. Listen to what he says to the Pharisees and Sadducees, who were the good church-goers of ancient Jerusalem: “You brood of vipers! (You children of snakes!) Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” In other words, what makes you think you will be spared from God’s judgment? “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” That, John says, is what God will do to you if you don’t make some fundamental changes in your life.

It is interesting that John the Baptist appears in all four gospels before Jesus does. Before any of the gospels tell us that Jesus loves us, they send out John the Baptist to tell us, “You are going to hell. All of you. You need to turn your life around. You need a complete overhaul of your soul.” That is not the message we usually want to hear. But according to all four gospels in the Bible, you have to hear that message, you have to understand that truth, before you will ever understand or appreciate Jesus.

John the Baptist is like step 1 of the twelve step recovery process in Alcoholics Anonymous. Step 1 says, “We admitted we were powerless over our sin—that our lives had become unmanageable.” Most of think we just need a few little adjustments: lose a little weight, exercise a little more, get a little more sleep, don’t spend money impulsively, have a little more patience with other people. This is the stuff of New Year’s resolutions—a few little tweaks to our personality. You know what? Jesus did not need to die on the cross for that. If all you needed was a little more sleep, a little more patience, or a little lower cholesterol, God would not have bothered sending Jesus. He would have sent Oprah. God sent Jesus because we have a serious problem. We are in open or not-so-open rebellion against God. Even those of us who go to church, like the Pharisees and Sadducees. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees we see religion as something to meet our needs, to satisfy our desires, to provide us with peace, security, and comfort. God exists to meet our needs, not we to serve God’s purposes. That is backwards, friends, and that is why John the Baptist says, “Repent, turn your life around. You are headed in the wrong direction.”

Like the boy Calvin, John the Baptist is quite good at telling people what is wrong with them. But he does not claim to have the solution. He says, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” John acknowledges that he can show us the problem, but he can’t fix it. He is like a doctor who says you have a terminal illness, but there is nothing he can do about it. So he refers you to someone else, and that someone else is Jesus.

Jesus is step 2 of the twelve step process. Step 1 says, “We admitted that we were powerless over our sin—that our lives had become unmanageable.” That is the message of John the Baptist. Step 2 says, “We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.” That Power is Jesus. Jesus is the one who can restore us to sanity. Jesus is the one who can turn us around and bring us back into the relationship with God that we were supposed to have all along.

But how does Jesus do that? Remember, we are not talking here about a self-help author who has a diet to help you lose weight or a plan to better manage your finances or some advice on how to improve your marriage. Those are good things, but they are not why Jesus came. Jesus came to work in us a complete overhaul of our souls, to turn us around, to bring us back to the relationship with God we were meant to have. How does Jesus do that?

Here we come to the strangest part of the story. Listen again to verses 13-15:

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?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

What is going on here? John is baptizing people because they are sinners, because they need to turn their lives around. But Jesus is the one who is supposed to save us from sin. How can Jesus save us from sin if he needs baptism, if he needs forgiveness of sin, just like we do?

The key is in Jesus’ reply. He says, “Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” When Jesus talks about fulfilling all righteousness, he is not talking only about his own righteousness; he is talking about all righteousness, meaning the right relationship to God that all people are supposed to have. Remember what the angel said to Joseph before Jesus was born. The angel said, “She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Jesus is the Higher Power who can save us from the self-destructive path we are on, the path of self-centeredness and alienation from God.

But the way he does it is a complete surprise. Instead of wagging his finger at us, like John the Baptist, instead of spending his days telling people what is wrong with them and how they should change, which is what Calvin wants to do, Jesus joins us in the water of baptism. Jesus goes with us into the river of repentance. By being baptized with all the other sinners, Jesus accepts the label of sinner for himself, even though he did not need to. In his baptism Jesus identified with us in our sin, so that when we are baptized we can identify with him in his righteousness.

In the New Testament there is a verse where the apostle Paul explains this. In II Corinthians 5:21 the apostle Paul says, "For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Jesus' baptism at the beginning of the gospel reveals the significance of Jesus' death at the end of the gospel. Jesus was baptized as a sinner in the Jordan River for the same reason he was condemned as a sinner on the cross. Jesus identified with us in our sin, in our separation from God, so that we could be joined with him in his righteousness, in his reunion with God.

Basically, Jesus was baptized with us, so that we can be baptized with him. When we are baptized in the name of Jesus, we are given the same gifts Jesus received at his baptism. When we are baptized, we too are given the Holy Spirit. When we are baptized, we too are declared to be God's beloved children. When we are baptized, we are given a new eternal life with God, the life for which God raised Jesus from the dead and raises us up to be with him.

You cannot understand or appreciate what that means without John the Baptist. John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus by helping us see why we need him. John the Baptist is the doctor who tells us we are terminally ill. Until you understand that, you cannot appreciate what it means to be offered a cure.

- Ken Onstot