

2023 01 15 – Fulfilling God’s Justice

**Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17 &
Isaiah 42:1-9** (The Inclusive Bible)

John the Baptizer lived in the desert and people came to him to hear his message of change and to be baptized. John told the people they needed to change because their world was about to be turned upside down. In his words, “the reign of Heaven is about to break upon you!” (Matthew 3:2) In order to prepare his followers for the reign of heaven, the kingdom of God, “John baptized them in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins” (Matthew 3:6). John walked into the river with them and those who were being baptized were totally immersed in the water and emerged as new and different people.

One day, Jesus arrived at the Jordan River where John was performing his baptisms. Jesus approached his cousin and asked if he too could be baptized. At this point, Jesus had not yet begun his ministry but John seemed to know that his cousin was special. John had probably heard the stories about Jesus’ birth and had witnessed his precocious cousin as he grew up and became a child prodigy, a scholar of Hebrew Scriptures. He may have even heard Joseph tell how Jesus received his name, a name that means “he saves.” John felt inferior to Jesus and, at first, refused to baptize his cousin. He told Jesus, “I should be baptized by you, and yet you come to me!”

It is strange to think that Jesus needed to be baptized, isn’t it? In those days, Jewish baptisms were usually reserved as a cleansing ritual or as an initiation for Gentiles who chose to become Jewish. Jesus had no need to be ritually

cleansed and he was already a Jew, so those reasons didn't apply. John had, of course, created his own reason for baptizing. He was asking people to repent, to turn to God. His followers would confess and be reborn in the waters of the Jordan. But again, those who knew Jesus would question his need for repentance and rebirth. So John had reason to refuse Jesus' request.

But Jesus said to John, "We must do this to completely fulfill God's justice." What did God's justice have to do with Jesus being baptized? What on earth was Jesus talking about? Well, this is where an understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures is helpful. The author of the Gospel of Matthew is obviously a scholar himself and he is constantly referring back to the ancient scriptures in order to understand who Jesus was and why his life and work was so important. In this case, the first verse of the 42nd chapter of the book of Isaiah will give us a clue:

Here is my Servant, whom I uphold
My chosen one, in whom I delight!
I have endowed you with my Spirit
that you may bring true justice to the nations.

According to the author of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is identifying himself as this Messiah, this Servant that the Israelites have been waiting for, the one who will bring peace and justice to the Hebrew people and to all nations. The author is saying that through his baptism, Jesus is planning to make a public declaration that his life's work will be focussed on fulfilling God's justice. By entering the waters of the Jordan, Jesus is committing himself to the creation of God's reign on earth, the reign of heaven, the kingdom of God.

It's important to note that God's justice is not about revenge and retribution or putting people in prison. God's justice is about truth and freedom and healing. Jesus is not about to raise an army to fight the Roman emperor. His work will be done in a non-violent manner. The prophet Isaiah said,

You do not cry out or raise your voice,
Or make yourself heard in the street.
So gentle that you do not break a bruised reed,
Or quench a wavering flame,
faithfully you will bring forth true justice.

We all know that Jesus wasn't quite that gentle. He certainly preached in the streets and even, at times, raised his voice in righteous anger. But his ministry was about healing and he never physically hurt another human being. This was kind of Messiah that Jesus was going to be. This was the kind of justice that Jesus was about to fulfill.

As we know, John reluctantly agreed to perform Jesus' baptism and together they went into the Jordan River. Jesus went down into the water and when he came back up again the words of the prophet Isaiah were fulfilled: Jesus was endowed with the Holy Spirit and God declared that Jesus was his Beloved, his chosen one in whom he delighted.

These readings, of course, are not just about Jesus and his role as the Messiah. In fact, some Old Testament scholars argue that, despite the interpretation in the Gospel of Matthew, this passage from Isaiah was not about a messianic figure at

all. It was, in fact, referring to an entire nation, the people of Israel. In verse 6, we read:

I have appointed you to be a covenant people,
a light to the nations:
to open the eyes of the blind,
to free the captives from prison,
and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon.

Like the Israelites, we are also called to be a covenant people. Through our own baptisms, confirmations and re-affirmations we are also making a commitment to fulfill God's justice, to work for God's reign on earth. Through our baptisms we become members of this community of faith, a congregation that upholds the value of justice and whose mission statement includes compassionate outreach in our community and in our world.

Every time we witness a baptism we are reminded that we are not alone in this work. In the sacrament of Baptism we use the pouring of water to express the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And we are reminded:

- How the living water is able to soak our souls with peace and hope and love.
- How the flow of the Holy Spirit is able to give us strength, patience and courage in times of struggle.
- How the Essence of Love is able to hold us up and carry us when we are in despair.

Jesus was baptized as a message to the Jewish people of his day that his ministry was beginning and that it was a ministry of justice inspired and supported by the Holy Mystery. With his baptism Jesus was committing himself to a life of fulfilling God's justice.

We too are baptized as a message to our community that our ministry is beginning and that it will also be a ministry of justice inspired and supported by God. With our baptisms, our confirmation our re-affirmations of faith, we too commit ourselves to a life of fulfilling God's justice.

May it be so. Amen.