

Baptized into Love
Sermon 168 | Greystone Baptist Church | January 15, 2023
Matthew 3:1-17

In the summer of 1963, the Civil Rights movement was reaching a pivotal point. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been in Montgomery for nearly a decade and had long secured his place as the leader of the movement.

There had been bus boycotts, sit-ins, and marches. Though the conversation on human rights for all people regardless of race was taking place nationwide, the struggles in Birmingham, Alabama became critical for the momentum of the whole cause. Leaders gathered in church basements and private residences planning their actions and strategies. Up to this point in the movement, participants in nonviolent resistance had mostly been college students and adults. But in Birmingham when the call went out for folks to come and engage in the protests, teenagers and children started showing up.

Everyone knew that participating in these acts of civil disobedience could be dangerous, leading to physical harm and arrest. But in Birmingham, under the leadership of police commissioner, Bull Connor, there was extraordinary risk. Connor was infamous for unleashing police dogs and fire hoses armed with pressure that could rattle a brick from the exterior of a building. These were his weapons used against the people. So when children started showing up, the Civil Rights leaders had a decision to make about who could participate in the protests and who could not. Age was of course a factor as the leaders debated the ethics of subjecting young children to such brutality. But as the organizers discussed and debated, the topic of baptism became a main point of conversation. Their logic was this: if a child is mature enough to be baptized, to enter into the water, following after Jesus himself, then that same child is old enough to engage in the work of Jesus here and now. Baptism is itself an act of death... and life.

In Baptism, we have accepted death in the kingdoms controlled by the likes of Herod, Caesar, and Bull Connor. In choosing to be baptized, we have already died to the false promises made by material wealth, white supremacy, and social status. And the great irony is that it is precisely in our death to all of these worldly things, that we find our life.

“Those who want to save their life, must lose it.” Jesus will say later on in Matthew 16.

So the leaders of the movement in Birmingham decided that children could participate in the nonviolent marches because if they had chosen baptism, they had already died to self, and their future was secure.

It is impossible to imagine the gravity of those kinds of decisions. To put ourselves in the room knowing everything that was at stake and not knowing how everything would turn out in the end. Many of us might like to think that we would have felt the same way, that we would have risked everything for this righteous cause, that we would have joined our Christian friends in the marches, facing whatever came and allowing our children to join in the holy work of liberation... I am not sure we would have been so brave.

What's more... I am not sure we would have considered baptism as part of that decision at all. And that is rather uncomfortable for me to admit.

As Baptists, we are very familiar with the Gospel reading from Matthew's third chapter. For Matthew, this is how Jesus' adult life begins. It is the very first thing in the Gospel after the visit from the magi and the migration of the holy family into Egypt where they claimed sanctuary during Herod's jealous reign.

Matthew picks the story back up with John, Jesus' cousin, baptizing in the wilderness. Now, John is a wild character whose description reminds us of the prophet Elijah. Both are creatures of the wilderness who live on the margins and call for repentance. John, like Elijah, wore camel-hair clothing and lived off the land, a diet of locusts and honey. His words were as jarring as his appearance when he faced the religious institutional leaders like the Pharisees and Sadducees. They represented a legalism that served the Kingdom of Archelaus (that was Herod's son) more than the Kingdom of God.

Their religion - that of the Pharisees and Sadducees - really was more like the "opiate of the masses" as Karl Marx so famously said, working in cahoots with the powers of this world to keep everything and everyone in order. Maybe this is why John calls them a "brood of vipers."

Together the two wilderness prophets, John and Elijah, remind the people of their own history of exile, times when they had to live off the land, relying on God's provision and presence in the fiery cloud for every small thing.

These stories also remind us that the wilderness is a scary place, a raw place, an uncertain place - and yet it seems to be precisely the place where God draws near, reviving us, renewing us, and making us whole again. The wilderness is an outside place, beyond the walls and reach of more orderly kingdoms ruled by men sitting on high thrones. And it is precisely this kind of place that draws Jesus in his first steps of adulthood.

In his commentary on Matthew, Stanley Hauerwas writes, "Matthew [...] is not writing to provide information about which we can make up our mind, but rather [he tells] us what we need to know to be drawn into the kingdom of God," (43)¹.

If Jesus' first steps are away from the relative safety and order of Nazareth and into the chaos of the wilderness, maybe our first steps should lead us in a similar direction? Maybe, according to Matthew, what we need to know in order to be drawn into the kingdom of God is that the kingdom begins in the wilderness.

Now, Matthew isn't satisfied with the narrative use of wilderness alone. Jesus doesn't just step out into the wilderness in his first act of adulthood, no, Jesus meets John there by the Jordan River and is baptized in the water. Again, as good students of the Bible our minds should be alight with the other moments where water (like wilderness) was a main

¹ Stanley Hauerwas. *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press: 2006), 43.

character. It was water that covered and consumed the earth in the days of Noah, destroying all of life except the few that God saw fit to save.

It was the water of the Red Sea that split at Moses' command allowing the Hebrew people safe passage to the other side. And it was that same water that came crashing down on Pharaoh's army that followed in close pursuit. Water is a source of life and death, liberation and transformation. Water, like wilderness, can be wild, can be risky, and can also be oh so holy.

Much has been written about the meaning of Christian Baptism. Denominations have been formed, de-formed, and re-formed by our baptismal theologies. Some insist that baptism is an individual choice, one that comes through the recognition that we are all sinners and are in need of God's mercy and grace. Many have written that through baptism, we are made to be better people making better choices and living more holy lives... and this is true! But this is not all. The Kingdom of God - proclaimed by the prophets from Elijah to John the Baptist - and embodied in the person, Jesus of Nazareth, *is* here and *is coming* still. God is redeeming the world starting on the outskirts, the margins... in the wildernesses of our lives and our communities. And baptism is our commitment to God's redemptive work. Baptism is an outward sign of an inward grace, a death that leads to life when we say NO to the kings and thrones of this world and YES to God's kingdom.

We have already chosen which kingdom to which we belong.

The Kingdom of God NOT the kingdoms of wealth, power, and prestige, and so it only makes sense that when God's kingdom is struggling to break through, we would want to be right there in the thick of it, carrying the signs, singing the songs, bearing witness to the Love that makes room for us all... It only makes sense that the baptized would want to be there, no matter the cost, to proclaim love in the face of hatred, Peace in the face of violence, and liberation in the face of oppression... This is the very meaning of baptism itself.

Yes, it is a personal and spiritual profession: Jesus Christ is Lord. Yes, it has eternal implications that give us hope for sharing in the resurrection of Jesus... But when we choose baptism for ourselves, when we say Jesus Christ is Lord... we pledge not only our eternal life, after we die and enter into the sweet by and by... We also pledge our whole life, here and now to the one who was born in the backwoods town of Bethlehem, whose first bed was a manger meant for livestock, whose family were refugees when he was too young to utter a word, and whose first action in adult life was to step outside of the city, into the wild and to participate in a ritual of repentance - a symbol of resistance - denying all the power that this world could offer and choosing instead a greater power, a power big enough to save us all, the power of God's love.

And when we choose to follow Jesus, we too are baptized into God's love.

You see, Jesus has changed the world. And Matthew is telling us the story. The purpose is not so that we can understand the facts as if we were watching it all unfold on an ancient

livestream, but rather so that we might become followers of Jesus, people whose lives have been changed and whose world views have been turned upside down because - through Jesus - we have seen the world anew... Through the lens of God's love.

Hauerwas says it this way: "To be a Christian does not mean that we are to change the world, but rather that we must live as witnesses to the world that God has changed. We should not be surprised, therefore, if the way we live makes the change visible," (25)².

Baptism means something because baptism changes everything.

People say that it was the children who captured the heart of the nation and changed the course of the movement in Birmingham ultimately leading to the passage of Civil Rights legislation.

...and baptism was a big part of their involvement.

Time has marched on, nearly 60 years have passed, and things have changed, but God's work is not complete... God is still working to redeem this world and people (like you and I) are still choosing to follow Jesus into the wilderness, into the waters of baptism, into the depth of God's love...!!

And who knows what kinds of opportunities we will find to "live as witnesses to the world that God has changed." Maybe we will join hands with the Martin Luther Kings of our day and work to make this world a more just and loving place... Maybe we will dedicate our lives to working behind the scenes, making sure all are fed, all are housed, and all are loved...

Maybe we will extend our arms - as if they were the very arms of Christ - spread to comfort and heal those who are sick, grieving, and lost... Maybe we will provide a refuge for those who have no other safe sanctuary... Maybe we will open our ears and hearts enough to listen to the moans of our broken world...

Who knows what opportunity may come our way - but when it does, as followers of Jesus, people who are baptized into Love, we must stand ready to bear witness and join in the work of God's kingdom coming to change *this* world, here and now.

² *ibid.*, 25.