

“Getting in Line”

“This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

I do not have a lot of experience with flying, but I have flown enough that I know what I can usually expect when I book a flight on a major airline. I try to find the best airfare and easiest route to my intended destination and usually expect to be able to choose my seat well before the day of my flight. But those expectations went out the window when we booked a flight to Albuquerque, New Mexico on Southwest Airlines. We had decided to visit Santa Fe, New Mexico to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary, and Albuquerque was the closest major airport to this destination. We found that Southwest had the best airfares and best schedule of flights to New Mexico, so we booked the flight and planned for our vacation which turned out to be very memorable. But when we went onto the airline’s website to choose our seats, we were surprised to learn that Southwest does not offer reserved seats but allows passengers to choose their seats on a first-come, first-served basis. When we arrived at the airport for our flight, we got in the line with other passengers waiting for the call to board the plane, hoping we would get a good seat on this low-budget airline that has no first-class section, offers no meals, and has very few other amenities. But this seemed reasonable since the cost was so low and it offered the best choice of flights to New Mexico.

But as we waited patiently in line with who we assumed were all the other passengers, we noticed that some people were avoiding the line but entering the jetway through another entrance. It turns out that Southwest Airlines is not as egalitarian as they advertise, because they offer “Priority” and “Express” lanes that allow what they refer to as “preferred passengers” to avoid the usual boarding lines in which we found ourselves. While the airline seemed to pride itself on offering equal access to seats, it turned out that some passengers were “more equal” than others.

It is not unusual for airlines or venues to offer different forms of access to persons depending on their value to the company or organization. Many visitors to Disney World take advantage of the “Fast Pass” that allows easier access to rides and attractions. Many restaurants and night clubs have “VIP entrances” for their preferred clients and celebrity guests. When we went to Rogers Centre to enjoy the

gift that Zion gave me for an ordination anniversary to watch a game in the Executive Suites, we were allowed to enter the stadium through a special entrance that allowed us to circumvent the usual lines as we were ushered to our suite. While standing in line is a regular part of life for many of us, for others access is granted without having to wait in a queue with the “ordinary people.”

On this first Sunday after the Epiphany, we remember the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. John plays a critical role in the gospel account of Jesus’ ministry; he is so important that he is prominently featured in all four Gospels, although only the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) offer accounts of the actual baptism of Jesus. We first met John during Advent where he is introduced as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy of “*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’*” (Isaiah 40:3, Luke 3:4). Luke’s Gospel includes an extended account of the annunciation of John’s birth to his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth by the angel Gabriel, who proclaims that their son “*will be great in the sight of the Lord [and] will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*” (Luke 1:15-16). His mother Elizabeth is related to Mary the mother of Jesus; when Mary visits her relative after her own visit from this same angel, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaims with a loud cry “*blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*” (1:42). On the day of his son’s circumcision and naming, Zechariah is also filled with the Spirit and prophesies that “*your child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.*” (1:76-77). The child who his parents named John “*was not given his name because of his person but because it signifies his testimony and ministry.*” (Martin Luther).

The next time we meet John he is an adult who has “*appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’*” (Matthew 3:2). While people were coming to John from Jerusalem and all Judea and “*were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins*” (3:6), John the Baptist clearly states that his role is not that of the Messian but to prepare the way for the one who is to come:

- “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” – 3:11-12.

It is while John is baptizing the crowds who are lining up to receive his baptism on the banks of the Jordan River that the adult Jesus appears for the first time in Matthew's Gospel: "*Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him*" (3:13). There is no evidence in this Gospel that John and Jesus have ever met, but when Jesus takes his place in line with those who have also come to be baptized John immediately recognizes him and asks why he is in this queue with ordinary people when he should be in a "VIP line" because of his special status that the Baptist recognizes: "*John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"*" 3:14). Matthew is the only Gospel that records this interchange between John and Jesus in which the Baptist acknowledges his subordinate role in relation to Christ, of which he had previously spoken. If John's baptism is only "with water" and "for repentance," John views himself as needed to be baptized by the one who "*will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire*" (3:11). Since John understands himself as the forerunner prophesied by Isaiah, he is uncomfortable with the strange reversal of roles in which the one who is "mightier" than he gets in line with the sinners at the Jordan for John's baptism of repentance. John believes that Jesus does not belong in this line with the rest of sinful humanity, and that he has no right to baptize the one who comes to be the "*Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*" (John 1:29).

- "The place [at the Jordan] was teeming with sinners – faulty, sorry, guilty human beings – who hoped against hope that John could clean them up and turn their lives around ... Some were notorious sinners, and some were there for crimes of the heart known only to themselves, but none of them had illusions of their own innocence. They had come to be cleaned. They knew they were not clean. Then Jesus showed up and got in line with them ... What was he doing in that crowd of sinners, looking and acting like one of them? What did he have to be sorry about, and why was God's Beloved submitting himself to such a scruffy character like John?" – Barbara Brown Taylor.

That "scruffy character" is about to take Jesus by the hand and guide him out of that line with the ordinary sinners to a line more suited to his identity than does Jesus stop him and insist that the Baptist "*let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.*" (3:15). This is the first time that Jesus speaks in Matthew's Gospel, authoritatively taking charge of his own baptism and insisting that it is necessary for him to get in this line and to be baptized along with the others in the queue so that he and John might "fulfill all righteousness." Both "righteousness" and "fulfillment" are key theological terms in Matthew; righteousness can refer to God's saving plan as well as doing the revealed will of God, while fulfillment refers to the fulfillment of Scripture. Jesus insists that it is

necessary for both he and John to do God's Will, which includes the baptism of Jesus; the plural "us" links John and Jesus as partners in carrying out God's saving plan. The baptism of Jesus "*becomes the occasion for his anointing as the Messiah-king and the confirmation of his divine sonship.*" (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

When Jesus insists that it is necessary for him to be in line with the others who have come to be baptized by John, the Baptist consents and baptizes Jesus in the waters of the Jordan. As Jesus comes up out of the water, Matthew presents a scene replete with eschatological overtones: "*suddenly the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him*" (3:16). Matthew presents the appearance of the Messiah as the being of the events which will fulfill all that had been proclaimed of the Coming One of God. The appearance of the dove may point to the dawn of the new creation, reminiscent of the dove-like movement of the Spirit over the chaotic waters as described in Genesis spoken of by Jesus to his disciples: "*Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel*" (19:28). This revelatory event at the Jordan River also recalls the commissioning of the prophet Ezekiel by the river Chebar ("*In the thirteenth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God*" – Ezekiel 1:1). The Spirit coming upon Jesus represents his anointing as Israel's Messiah in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: "*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour ...*" (Isaiah 61:1-2a). The descent of the dove suggests that this event at the beginning of Jesus' ministry marks the beginning of a new world, a new creation; in the book of Acts, Peter proclaims what the baptism of Jesus means to those Gentiles who have heard the Gospel and will soon receive the same Spirit of God:

- "You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout all Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced; how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him." – Acts 10:36-38.

As the heavens are opened and the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove, a voice from heaven speaks and proclaims that "*this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased*" (3:17). While in other accounts these words are heard

only by Jesus (“*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*” – Luke 3:22), in Matthew the announcement is heard by all who are witnessing this appearance and proclamation. The voice from heaven is God’s voice, revealing Jesus’ divine Sonship in words from the Old Testament:

- “I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you.’” – Psalm 2:7.
- “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.” – Isaiah 42:1.

With the Spirit descending on Jesus and God speaking to him as the one “*with whom I am well pleased*,” Jesus is clearly identified as the servant foretold by Isaiah and also recalls the “beloved son” of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, who was a forerunner of Jesus as the one who will be offered as a sacrifice for sin.

- “John yields because John has no choice. John yields because he realizes that the one to whom he must yield, Jesus, is now here … Jesus is baptized not to repent of sins, for he is without sin, but to establish and give witness to a relationship that shows that he belongs to God and is called to do God’s work in the world. He is baptized as a witness to God’s claim upon him.” – Peter Gomes.

As we remember the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are called to remember our own baptism and what it means for us to be baptized into a new and living hope as children of God. As Jesus was baptized by John at the beginning of his ministry, our risen Lord gathers his disciples at the end of this Gospel to commission them to “*go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*” (28:19-20). This commandment, along with water and the Word, are what make Holy Baptism a sacrament, a means of grace through which “*we are reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ*” (ELW Holy Baptism). In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther teaches what baptism means and the blessings it bestows upon those who are born anew to a living hope through baptism into Christ:

- “Baptism is not simply plain water. Instead, it is water used according to God’s command and connected to God’s word … It brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of God declare.”

It is through baptism that we are reborn children of God and inheritors of the blessings that are ours as heirs of God's promise. In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that "*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*" (Romans 6:5) and teaches in his letter to the Galatians that "*as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*" (Galatians 3:27-28). In the first letter of Peter, the apostle offers thanks and praise to God because "*by his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you*" (1 Peter 1:3-4). When the crowd in Jerusalem heard Peter's Pentecost sermon and "*were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?'*" Peter said to them, '*Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*'" (Acts 2:37-38).

- "Baptism is the gospel in miniature, portrayed, lived out, enacted. And the gospel is promise. And promise, in biblical language, is not merely the offer of a gift on the part of God but the very gift itself imparted with that offer. The faith that receives, is nourished by, and relates to baptism clings to the promise which centers in the reality of the forgiveness of sins. This reality produces the only kind of joy that the Christian needs to seek or should seek."
– Martin Marty.

As Jesus chose to get in line and identify with sinful humanity so that he might be the one to redeem us from all that would separate us from God, so do we who have been baptized into Christ get in that same line in our witness to Christ and our desire to embody Christ's loving presence in the world. As we affirm our baptismal promises this morning, we promise to "*continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism: to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth*" (ELW Affirmation of Baptism). As Jesus confirmed his identity as the beloved Son of God through his death and resurrection, we witness to our identity as children of God as we endeavor to love and serve one another in the name of the one into whom we have been baptized.

- "Christianity does have a mission to the world, and that mission is the most basic reason for the existence of the church ... the mission of the church is of

central importance to Christian faith, so much so that it constitutes the most basic reason why the church must exist.” – Douglas John Hall.

I must admit that I was envious of those in the “priority” line who were able to bypass the long line that was waiting to board our Southwest flight; but I also know that as Christ did not choose the way of comfort or status but got in line with the rest of humanity so that he might be the Saviour of all humanity that our place as those who bear the name of Christ through Holy Baptism is to get in that same line so that we might bear the love of God to all people, so that as the voice from heaven identified Jesus as God’s beloved Son our presence and service to others will identify us as children of God. As Christ was known for his love for all, so also will others know we are Christians – God’s beloved children – by our love!

Amen.