

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 1/13/08
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Matthew 3:13-17

When I was a student at Union Seminary in Manhattan, there was a professor of New Testament named Robin Scroggs. Dr. Scroggs was famous for giving an incredibly difficult assignment to those in his Introduction to the New Testament class. Over the course of the semester, students were asked to write their own gospel. They were to tell the story of Jesus in their own way, emphasizing what they thought was most important. They were instructed to take what they'd read and heard about Jesus, and had experienced personally, and then to construct the story of Jesus in a way that made the most sense to them. As they compiled, wrote, and edited, they were to imagine who might be hearing or reading their account of the good news of Jesus Christ, whether within their current faith community or in another time and place.

Most students used index cards to write down what they considered to be the essential teachings of Jesus, and the critical events in his life. For weeks, we'd see the Intro. to New Testament students carrying around their huge packs of 3x5 cards, and then laying them out – arranging and rearranging them on tables in the library, the coffee table in the commuter lounge, even down long, seldom-used hallways. We knew the semester was drawing to a close when the cards finally disappeared - as the students wrote their introductions and epilogues, transferred their selected teachings of Jesus and events of his life from the cards to the manuscript that would be handed in, and tied it all together through their individual narratives and commentary.

The point of the assignment was to show the students that, from a scholarly point of view, it's not advisable to take a portion of text from Scripture and just assume that this is exactly what happened. The Gospels were not intended to be received as factual, historically accurate records of everything that Jesus said and did, in the precise order that it all happened. No news teams were doing on-the-scene coverage of Jesus' life and ministry. People who were there experienced, remembered, understood, and told the stories differently. And when the Gospels were finally written down, decades after Jesus' death, the voices of each of their writers arose from different faith communities and addressed different groups of people facing different problems and concerns.

I've said all of this as an introduction to the reading from Matthew appointed for today - the story of the baptism of Jesus. All four Gospel writers mention the baptism, so there's every reason to believe that it did, in fact, take place. But the details in each account are a little different. As we look at the way Matthew presents this story, we learn something of how he and his faith community experienced the presence of the risen Christ, what they believed and proclaimed about the person and ministry of Jesus, and we have the opportunity to consider how their experience informs our own.

Matthew is the only one of the Gospel writers who addresses the question of why Jesus would submit to John's baptism, in a brief interchange between John and Jesus. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is identified as Israel's long-awaited Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of God, God's anointed One. Why, then, would Jesus come from Galilee to the Jordan River so that he

could be baptized by John, whose role was to be a lesser one than Jesus'? In Matthew's account, John recognizes the awkwardness of the situation, given the disparity in their standing, saying to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" And why would Jesus, the Messiah, participate in a ritual that was intended for sinners to repent and be cleansed?

Matthew's explanation for what Jesus chooses to do comes through the words of Jesus: "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Some biblical scholars suggest that a more straightforward translation of Jesus' response to John might sound something like this: "It is urgent for us to do this to bring about God's saving action in the world. We must commit to setting right the things that are wrong." Jesus' first public act in that regard is to forego entitlement, and to fully identify and join with others who, with heavy hearts and burdened souls, responded to John's call to repentance, turning toward God and engaging a new reality – the Kingdom of God. Jesus – God's anointed One – doesn't stand apart, separating himself from the suffering around him. He chooses a different way, plunging right into that suffering.

Matthew's story of Jesus' baptism continues: "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. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' Matthew affirms Jesus' identity as God's anointed One through this vivid picture of divine revelation and empowerment, and through the words of the voice from heaven. And behind those words is Matthew's understanding of Jesus' mission. The words spoken by that voice from heaven echo what's known as the Servant Songs of Isaiah, a short selection of which was our first reading from Isaiah. The early Christians who heard and read those words from Matthew's description of Jesus' baptism would recall the tradition from Isaiah of an obedient servant of God, who comforted and restored God's people not through a mighty exertion of force and power, but by a different way - through his identification with God's people and his suffering on their behalf.

The liturgical calendar of our church gives us the opportunity each year to remember Jesus' baptism and, in its three-year lectionary cycle, to consider this event, in turn, through the lens of three different Gospel writers and their faith communities. Matthew's interpretation shows us Jesus, God's Beloved, bringing about God's saving action in the world by choosing a different way.

Our encounter with the story of Jesus' baptism brings to mind our own. Kathleen Norris writes, "Baptism ... is about celebrating the incomparable gift we receive as creatures beloved of God. But baptism is also about more fully engaging the responsibility that this identity entails. The baptism of Jesus initiated his public ministry, which led him to the cross. For individual Christians, baptism is our call to the community of the church, which often provides us with crosses of our own to bear. Yet it is together, as church, that we are meant to witness to peace in a cruel and violent world and bring a message of hope in the face of despair. Whatever the worldly powers may be – Roman rulers or contemporary dictators, corrupt lobbyists, arms traders and war profiteers – Christians are called to witness to another, greater power. Our baptisms mark us for this purpose." *

Together, as church, we're called as God's beloved and empowered to live in a different way – to practice peace, to bring hope, to witness to the loving presence and power of God in our midst. How might our unique identity and calling as church, in this time and place, set right the things that are wrong? How might our identity and calling as church have a real and lasting impact our encounters with suffering and injustice?

What are the highlights of the Gospel according to St. Augustine's Church? How might we, together, understand our own Gospel narrative – the story of the good news of the risen Christ right here among us? Amen.