

January 8, 2017
Baptism of the Lord
Matthew 3:13-17
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Welcome to the season of Epiphany. The magi now have left their gifts and gone back home, the star in the east is no longer visible, and Jesus is growing up. Epiphany is a season of light, of revealing. What gets revealed is the nature of who Jesus is, the One whose coming we have just celebrated in the twelve days of Christmas. Greater focus on Jesus' actions and teachings will unfold gradually for us in the coming weeks. But for now, the invitation is to steep ourselves in the reality of what it means that God became a human being in Jesus.

Consider who does the listening and who does the speaking in today's story from Matthew's gospel. Jesus comes to John and wants to be baptized. John initially objects, and Jesus responds by saying we need to do this to fulfill what God wants and what God told the prophets would happen – "to fulfill all righteousness" as Matthew writes – that is, to make all relationships right again. After hearing this, John then consents to baptize Jesus. And as Jesus comes up dripping wet out of the water, there is a voice from heaven that declares, seemingly so all who are present can hear, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

As Christians who embrace the Incarnation, we believe all creation has been made good and that God became fully human in the person of Jesus. So then, there is ample room and reason to believe that Jesus came to self-recognition of his identity and calling over time, just like any other human being does. Scripture doesn't tell us much about this explicitly, other than in Luke's gospel at the end of the 2nd chapter, where Jesus has gone to the temple with Mary and Joseph and wandered off, telling them after they eventually find him that he had to be about his Father's business. Luke writes simply, "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor". Aside from that brief snapshot, Scripture is silent about Jesus' childhood, adolescence and young adult years. But something had to be happening in those years before Jesus comes to John to be baptized.

"Jesus increased in wisdom and years". I like to think that in those formative years Jesus might have been learning to listen. Learning to listen to his parents Mary and Joseph and to members of his extended family. Learning to listen to the wise spiritual elders who taught him the Jewish faith. Learning to listen to his own heart, mind, and spirit. Learning to listen for God's voice and God's direction. By learning to listen, Jesus grew in the ability to discern who he was as a person, who he was in relationship to God and others, and what next steps he needed to take to follow God's calling for

him. Through listening, Jesus is led to ask John to baptize him. Before there is any public preaching, teaching, or healing for him, Jesus has been learning to listen.

I hope you know one or two people who are good listeners, because they are indeed precious gifts for any of us who encounter them. Most of us are not great listeners. We don't seem to be born knowing how to listen. It's something we have to learn. To really listen to another requires humility, receptivity, and expectant faith. To really listen means I learn to set aside my agenda, my own wishes and preoccupations. To listen receptively means that I intentionally create open space for the other to speak and be heard. Listening with expectant faith means that I believe God wants to communicate and will communicate with us – and often does so through others.

In our American culture, we do a lot of chattering at each other, past each other, and over each other, both directly person to person and through social media. In contrast, I recall the best class I had in seminary was a year long course in Christian meditation. It was a small class of six students that met once a week. We had to learn how to be still, to let our minds be quieted by the Holy Spirit's presence, to trust that there was some sort of communing with God taking place, even if we didn't feel anything special or couldn't see anything happening, or pinpoint any "results". We kept journals of our experiences of mediation practice between weekly classes. In response to one of my journal entries my professor wrote in the margin: "You are such a Protestant" – meaning that in my writing I kept whining that nothing was happening, I was frustrated that I wasn't seeing any visible "results" from trying to learn to be still and meditate. I wanted something to show for my "work" of meditating. It wasn't enough to just try and listen for God.

It's a real challenge to step away from our own self-protection, self-preoccupation, and desire for self-advancement to listen deeply to God. And we know from our own life experience that when we follow God's leading it does not always result in the kind of clear affirmation like Jesus receives at his baptism. But his obedience in being baptized and that divine affirmation were Jesus' ordination", if you will. It was the launching point for the rest of his ministry.

And that divine affirmation is what happens for every person in the waters of Holy Baptism. We hear that we have been made a new creation, buried and raised to new life through Christ's death and resurrection and we claim our name as God's beloved son or daughter. Baptism is the beginning of every Christian's lifelong call to ministry in Jesus' name.

Jesus grew up in a very communally focused culture and faith tradition. So of course he continued to live intentionally in community when he called the twelve to follow and become his apprentices, his disciples, which means “learners”.

We need others to grow and learn. Through living in community we learn to identify our gifts. We challenge each other, and sometimes have our rough edges rubbed smooth in community.

One of the main tasks of the Church is to listen for God, and allow the Spirit to form us together to become part of God’s Beloved Community, learning to live the ways of Jesus with each other and in the world – the way of reconciliation, non-violence, and love.

It is an increasingly rugged and tough task, to be the church, to be part of the “Jesus movement” as our presiding bishop calls us, because there is very little in our culture that supports us to think of the common good before our own individual wants and needs.

The good news is that God is still speaking! God has affirmed each of us and called us to use our gifts in ministry in Christ’s name. God can be trusted to equip us to use our gifts. So, how well are we listening for God’s continuing affirmation? How are we responding to God’s call to serve?

Today is one of the days in the liturgical year that is recommended for conducting baptisms. Though we have no one being presented for baptism today, we will renew our baptismal vows in just a moment.

As you come forward to receive the Holy Eucharist today, you are invited to touch the water in the bowl up front, perhaps make the sign of the cross on yourself if you choose, to be reminded of your baptism and to give thanks for this outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Remember that you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever. Take time to pray to become a deeper and more holy listener. For holy listening can lead us to take holy action in Jesus’ name. And this our world desperately needs. Amen.