

“The World’s Turning”  
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Matthew 3:13-17

It must have been hard, all that time of waiting and watching, of wandering in the wilderness, proclaiming the coming of God’s kingdom in the Messiah. John angered powerful people by speaking the truth of God’s justice and mercy and judgment. Many no doubt mocked him. Those who came to listen and receive the baptism of repentance he offered were perhaps not the choicest crowd. Yet John endured deprivation and derision, and disappointment and frustration from a desire not yet fulfilled, but hope drove him onward until finally the day he had prepared so hard for came, and what did John do? He hesitated.

This moment is what he had been waiting for, but when Jesus arrived at the Jordan to be baptized, the Baptist proved reluctant. How could he baptize a man who needed no repentance? He had never confronted, perhaps not even considered the possibility that, someone would come who had no need. Instead, John wanted to feel the healing waters pour from the hands of Jesus onto his own head. An almost comical exchange occurred in River Jordan. “No, you baptize me, Jesus. No, you really need to baptize me, John. It’s not right. Yes, it is.”

Of course, we know who prevailed in that polite disagreement. It’s a tidy story of reluctance and consent, of hope fulfilled and a mission accomplished, a story of John’s humility, however misguided, and a humble Jesus, receiving something he did not need, a baptism offered specifically for repentance from sin, so that the world and each person in it, including you and me, could receive what we need most: forgiveness; reconciliation with God; atonement, a word that Archbishop Desmond Tutu likes to break down as “at-one-ment.”

You see, Jesus never sinned. The basic condition of sin is self-inflicted estrangement from God, which manifests itself in the many thoughts, words, and deeds that we commonly call sins. Jesus enjoyed a perfect relationship with God, because he was God, and scripture teaches us that God is perfectly united, in perpetual peace, the source of all love, because God is love. On the other hand, we and everyone else ever born, have both the capacity and the inevitable tendency to become estranged from God, divided from others, including the people we love most, and even divided from own selves, at war within our souls. For Jesus, that was not a problem, but by being baptized he set an example for us to follow, so that through the mystery of those healing waters we might be made whole. Jesus, by participating in baptism, transformed that event, endowing it with the Holy Spirit's power for transformation.

Repentance roughly means "to turn around." The Greek word for it, *metanoia*, translates literally as "beyond the mind" or "over the mind." Related to the word *metanoia* is the more familiar term *paranoia*, which means "of two minds" or "to be beside oneself." Paranoia is something we have in plentiful supply nowadays. So in repentance, there is more than merely saying sorry, more than making the bad good, and much more than buying into come celestial fire insurance policy. Instead, repentance is about the reorientation of someone's life, a comprehensive change that transcends the ordinary to the extent that a repentant person finds herself beyond the mind, and into a realm of experience called the holy.

This is what Jesus was baptized into, but still one wonders why. Did he really need a life change, a reorientation, a turning around? It's hard to say. We know nothing of Jesus' adult life before his baptism. We can surmise, speculate, infer, and that's OK. It's fun. Most people assumed he worked with wood like his dad. Others read non-canonical gospels that didn't make the cut into the Bible, gospels that tell wild stories about Jesus travelling the world, soaking up

esoteric knowledge from the wisest and most ancient sources. But the authority we follow, the canonical books of the Bible chosen by the Church, gives us nothing.

What happened in the adult life of Jesus before his baptism simply held no interest for the Gospel writers. This stark silence speaks more loudly than any words could. It emphasizes the crucial character of baptism as a turning point so vital for Jesus that everything that came beforehand just isn't worth mentioning. The placement of this event in the gospel stories makes it plain that baptism served as the inauguration of Jesus' ministry.

When the waters of baptism poured off Jesus, the heavens that had poured down those very waters opened up to release the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, and he went into the wilderness to prepare for his return to the world. After forty days of this self-imposed exile, he came back and began to gather followers. Miracles started happening, and parables poured forth. And the world began to change, slowly, perhaps imperceptibly at times, yet change it did, one person at a time.

Could it be that, when Jesus was baptized by John and filled with the Holy Spirit, his life turned toward his mission, a mission of forgiveness and reconciliation and redemption designed to turn the world upside down and our lives around? Could it be that John's reluctance was born of a keen intuition that whispered to him of how that handful of water would trickle down through history, shifting whole landscapes of reality and wearing down sharp rocks into fertile, fruit-bearing soil where the seed of the Kingdom of God would be planted and flourish?

John must have at least suspected what he was unleashing, what his act would summon from the heavens. Yet it was so awesome as to be incomprehensible. Even if we could be as faithful and as crazy as John, truly something to aspire for, we too might hesitate when

confronted with a moment in which the possibility for the world to be created anew bursts forth. In fact, we do hesitate most of the time.

You see, this is the power of baptism, to change not only a single life, but the world entire. And this is a power not restricted to the baptism of Jesus, but through his baptism, a power accessible to all who seek in baptism hope for the world. This is made clear in the baptismal covenant we share. The promises we once made, and repeatedly renew each time a new member is brought into the Body of Christ, focus both inward and outward. Those vows describe a life of deep internal change where the grace of God brings us peace and acceptance within, which in turn empowers us for engagement, for transformative witness and action within the world.

I wonder how John felt as Jesus walked away from their encounter. Perhaps there was an anti-climatic letdown, somewhat like the one we sometimes feel after Christmas. I wonder if John might have second-guessed himself. I imagine him muttering by the banks of the Jordan, “I probably shouldn’t have done that. He really didn’t need it.” Did John go on with life as before, or was the unexpected repentance of Jesus a turning point for John as well? How will it be for us? Amen.