### “That Message Spread” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Jan. 8, 2023

**Acts 10:34–43**

34Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. 37That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38how 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. 39We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

**Matthew 3:13–17**

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 15But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. 16And when Jesus had been baptized, 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. 17And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Welcome to First Church. When I count my blessings, the wonderful church family here at First Church is definitely one of them. And it is that sense of “family” that I have come to truly love and enjoy, and I know this is one of the places I can share my faith-journey with others. I hope you feel the same.

If I had had a sudden inspiration or understanding, I know I could share it with you. And it is this sudden awakening, the “ah-ha!” moment that most of us would call an “epiphany”—when an idea suddenly comes to you or you finally understand a point of conversation. Today is Epiphany Sunday. Epiphany means a sudden appearance, or a sudden *spiritual* appearance. In church tradition, two different events are celebrated on Epiphany: first, Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, and secondly, the visit by the Magi. I’ve chosen to focus on the baptism text.

It is the longest face-to-face interaction between John and Jesus of which we have a record from the gospels. It shows John humbly recognizing Jesus’ superiority, and not wanting to baptize him for that reason. But Jesus sees it as appropriate, as “fulfill[ing] all righteousness” (Matt 3:15), so John consents. It fulfills all righteousness to let the older, traditional prophetic system, which John represents, evolve to its completion. John performing the baptizing is not meant to show that John is superior, but that the baptizing ritual was an appropriate and true expression of the prophetic mission and the evolution of the succession of prophets, culminating in John the Baptist. By consenting to being baptized, Jesus is affirming the tradition of Hebrew prophets. He is also affirming the legitimacy of John.

The epiphany of the baptism, which means a sudden appearance, occurs when the skies are opened, the Spirit of God appears over Jesus, and speaks those memorable words. “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (3:17). It may be that only a small number of people witnessed the event and heard the voice. But the impact of the event endures, and is described in all four gospels.

Now, what does the Acts passage tell us about Jesus’ mission? Luke, the author of Acts, emphasizes that Jesus went about doing good, healing, and rescuing people from the devil (Acts 10:38). The crucifixion was indeed an injustice, but he was raised from the dead and then appeared to those who already believed in him (10:40–41). He will return to judge the living and the dead. All the prophets testified of him, and all who believe in him receive forgiveness of sins (10:42–43). The death and the resurrection are a central part of the story the early apostles told, but there is no mention of a substitutionary death, no notion that he had to die in order for salvation to be possible. Jesus’ apostles wanted to acknowledge the facts of Jesus’ death, but also share the good news that there is life after death. After our journey here on earth, we, too, will continue to learn and grow and serve in God’s family.

This chapter from Acts provides a quick summary of what Jesus was known for, and what he was believed to be. In Luke’s writing, Jesus is the Messiah, and a divinely appointed judge. He was known as a healer and one who rescued people from the devil’s influence. The conversation with John goes deeper than that, at least as regards Jesus’ prophetic mission. It shows Jesus’ attitude toward the line of the prophets. The prophets represent righteousness, and he shows his respect for the prophets by consenting to be baptized. He also is allowing John to continue with his own work. He does not pre-empt or take over John’s work until after John is arrested. Jesus’ respect for John no doubt enabled many of John’s followers to feel comfortable joining with Jesus’ fellowship in the days to come.

Jesus had the authority to take over John’s baptizing work, if he had wanted to, but he doesn’t. He wants to let the prophet continue doing what he is doing. Jesus’ authority also comes up at the end of the Acts passage, where it says, “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). “Through his name” means through his power, or through his authority.

This is saying Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. The Pharisees made an issue of this in one of the stories we have in Mark and Luke, where Jesus forgives the sins of the man who was lowered down through the roof to hear his teachings, and the Pharisees protest, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Luke 5:21). Jesus answers “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’?” and then proceeds to heal the paralyzed man, who stands up and walks (5:23–25).

This is intended to show that if he can do the harder thing, heal the lame, he can do the easier thing, forgiving sins. He really only flexes his authority this way when there is someone upon whom the Pharisees look down. Jesus shows that he will defend the vulnerable people against the pride and judgment of the self-righteous. He had no need to flex his authority over John the Baptist.

A psalmist had written “For the Lord hears the needy, and does not despise his own that are in bonds” (Ps 69:33). Jesus acts this out, hearing the cries of the needy repeatedly. There are blind people, deaf people, poor people, sick people, grieving parents, who all benefited from his intervention in their lives.

So, for today, spread the word, know that the Jesus of those days is here with us today. He knows our joys and our sorrows. He knows our successes, our struggles, and our inner-most heart. Be ready to receive God’s love for you and let *your* Light shine!