

“Let it be so now”

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I am beginning to wonder if the Holy Spirit is trying to tell me something about John the Baptist, because since the beginning of Advent he’s shown up in four of my sermon texts! This is the day that the Church remembers the Baptism of our Lord in the Jordan River, and of course John the Baptizer plays a lead role in this chapter of the life of Christ. John is standing in the water up to his knees, in all his rugged authenticity, boldly proclaiming the coming of a new creation. People from all over are lining up to repent for their sins and let this strange prophet guide them into the waters of a new and more Godly life. As that line moves along, and the next candidate for baptism steps into the water, John’s heart skips a beat. His cry for repentance catches in his throat, and his eyes fill with tears of wonder as the one for whom he lays the path steps toward him.

The Gospel does not give us much detail, does not tell us every word that must have passed between these two, but we know that John knew Jesus in a way that does not require words. The man who fearlessly called religious leaders a brood of vipers, whose words of audacious honesty led even the most self-

righteous of sinners to fall on their knees before God's mercy, sees Jesus and knows immediately that this is the one he has been waiting for, the one whose sandals he is not worthy to touch, whose ministry will increase as his own must decrease. John knows this man is the only man on earth whose repentance is unnecessary, the only man in the whole world purer than the waters of baptism.

John would have prevented Jesus, the gospel tells us. John would have stopped his Lord, would have fallen on his knees and asked to be baptized with the baptism of fire that comes at the hands of Immanuel. But "let it be so now" Jesus tells him. Jesus does not deny or dispute John's claim that baptism is unnecessary for God made Man. Jesus does not accuse John of false humility or misunderstanding. Jesus simply says "Let it be so now." The Word of God, spoken into existence through the love of the Father and the obedience of Mary his mother, chooses once again to make himself vulnerable to human hands. The savior of the world places himself at the mercy of a human being, a sinner, to show us once again that God's power is not wielded, but given freely to his own creation.

Because that is what Jesus does, when he answers the call of the prophet to receive baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus approaches the river alongside soldiers who shed their armor and cast down their weapons, alongside religious zealots who relinquish their heavy adornments, alongside women and children who lay down their work and their play to meet God in the water. The banks of the

Jordan must have been littered with discarded robes and vestments and valuables, thrown down by those who saw no other way forward than to wade in the water. They could not take their money or their jewelry or their fine clothing with them, it would only weigh them down as they made the journey to John's side. They could not bring their livestock with them, or their homes, or their titles. Jesus falls in line with half naked sinners, stripped bare of all except the pains and the sorrows and the sins they are finally ready to have washed away. Jesus, God incarnate, does not bring with him anything except his untarnished love for them, for these human creatures that reflect his own image. When Jesus gives himself into the hands of John, and allows himself to be pushed below the surface of the river, he affirms his own humanity, his solidarity with us. John does not wash sin from Jesus, but rather Jesus takes on every pain and sorrow and anxiety and weakness of every person who ever will be washed in the waters of baptism. John takes the God of all creation in his arms, and washes him in his own humanity. And 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 a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased."

Just as the Spirit of God moved over the waters at the beginning of creation, just as the Word of God spoke all things into being, the spirit of God descends once again over the waters as the Word emerges from them, naming for us a new

identity born of God's unending love for us. Beloved. John called all people to repentance of sins, and the one who knew no sin answered the call so that we all might know that we are his children. So that we all might know what it is to be Beloved of God. At the moment of our baptism, and every moment thereafter, we are called to become more human and more holy, more embodied and more spirit-filled. Just as Jesus allowed himself to be enveloped in the waters of baptism we are called to submit ourselves to be overcome by the life of God, the source of our life and our faith. Just as Jesus laid down his omnipotent power alongside the earthly mantles and armor on the riverbank, we are called by the ever present truth of our baptism to lay down our pride and our weapons and dive headfirst into the water. Because when Christ emerged, he was anointed for his ministry, and went forth to preach the Gospel. We have been anointed in his name to go and do likewise. Let it be so now.