

Matthew 3:13-17

13Then 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.

Sermon:-It's about liberation

Matthew packs a lot of faith history into these few words. His goal seems to be to invite us into the fray where God is doing new things...yet doing the same thing that God has done all along—I like how our Bishop Michael describes what God has been up to from the start— “blessing and saving the world”. If there’s a word for the day it might be “liberation”.

Knowing about the first people to hear Matthew’s story helps us appreciate how they would experience God’s liberating word to them. Imagine having your homeland invaded yet again. Imagine figuring out how to resist the ethic of the day that rewards revenge and applauds brute force. Imagine living as a tiny sect in a faith community that already divided into different subgroups. The people who first hear Matthew’s Gospel are likely well educated, living in a multicultural urban setting, so these folk are living on the margins in a lot of ways. These same folk would have a deep connection to their history and the hopes and dreams of their ancestors.

Maybe when they hear the story of Jesus’ baptism, they automatically connect parts of their tradition to the event... We experience gaps of time, space, culture, and religious experience between these hearers and ourselves. The gaps mean we might need time to see the connections between this new thing God does in Jesus’ baptism and God’s long game to bless and save the world.

The Hebrew people's hymn book sings of the voice of God reverberating with bold proclamation and the audacious hope that the Lord will bring peace. We read and sing those words in Psalm 29! Maybe melody and lyric come to mind when people hear about How God rips open the heavens to speak when Jesus is baptized.

The ancient traditions speak of doves as messengers from God. Maybe Noah's story comes to mind?

Some commentators say that God's speaking is the true main event in Jesus' baptism. Remember the words *this is my Son*? Similar words were spoken of the very first King of Israel. People hoped and dreamed of having their own place. They yearned for fulfillment of God's promises to Sarah and Abraham that from them an entire nation would come to be.

Speaking of Sarah and Abraham...God's voice at Jesus baptism identifies Jesus the beloved—the same phrase that describes Isaac, beloved son of Sarah and Abraham.

At the Jordan river, God calls Jesus "*Chosen*". We might sail right by that title. Matthew's first hearers likely recalled the prophet Isaiah who spoke of—the suffering servant calling people to act justly and to keep hope alive for liberation from exile. Even the end of the exile would remind people of yet another liberating event—when God freed the Israelites from slavery and Jesus coming up out of the water...like the Israelites passing through the Red Sea.

When Jesus and John's bodies break the surface of the water at baptism, witnesses and those first hearing the story some sixty years later likely pictured Israel's newly liberated children passing through water to begin a very long journey to freedom and toward becoming a distinct people.

Maybe Jesus' words to John about his baptism as a fulfillment of righteousness make sense to Matthew's first hearers. Maybe having heard about the connections between Jesus' baptism and God's bigger story, we're getting a glimpse too. Defining a word will bring us a step closer...

Righteousness is a word with multiple meanings. If we attend to the way a Hebrew person would speak of righteousness, we might see more of what God intends for us...and for all of creation.

Righteousness is more about relationship and about restoring relationship than it is about rectitude and keeping New Year's resolutions. You see, God's agenda of liberation is for the sake of restored relationships and bringing everything back into harmony—God does plenty of new things even now in a bid to restore all things.

Jesus' baptism initiates him into a life dedicated to the restoration of all things. Finally, if we would like to connect all the richness of the Gospel story to our baptism, we have a way in...As the writer and preacher Eugene Peterson liked to say, at baptism we are middle voice—both having baptism done to and for us as recipient and we are participants every day in what baptism means.

We are baptized into Christ. We are baptized into God's grand and ageless yet on going story of the mending of all of creation.