



Series Theme: Epiphany

Title: It Started at the River

Date delivered: January 13, 2019

Preacher: Rev. Joyce Donigian

Synopsis: Jesus' ministry started at the Jordan River. Where did yours begin?
Where will your ministry lead you?

THE FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON: Luke 1:57-67

THE SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON: Matthew 3:13-17

MEMORY VERSE: "For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ." 2 Corinthians 5:21

Grace to you and peace from the One who is and who was and who is to come.

Because last week on the church calendar was Epiphany, Pastor Doug led us on a journey across miles and miles of desert, mountains, and dangerous roads to follow the wise men to Bethlehem to honor baby Jesus.

Today on the church calendar we are to celebrate the baptism of Jesus. This would be a logical progression if Jesus' family practiced infant baptism. However, this was not the case – Jesus brought himself to his cousin John the Baptist as an adult to be baptized. Those of us who have raised children know that time passes quickly – but not quite this fast. Thirty years, just like that. Yet today marks the celebration of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. So let's take a look at this momentous occasion.

We have likely heard this story often: Jesus came to John the Baptist to be baptized, and during this baptism a dove appeared and God from heaven gave approval. This account is so familiar that I think we miss some of the wonder and surprise in it. We know through scripture that Jesus was perfect, without sin. It could not be otherwise since he was to take on all of the sins of the world and bring salvation to all who believed. We also know that John the Baptist asked his followers to be baptized with water only, as a sign of their turning away from sin – to wash away the sins they had committed.

Jesus came to John the Baptist for this kind of baptism. He came alone since he had not yet chosen his disciples. This was something Jesus needed to do alone. But this brings up a question: why did he want to do this? It could not have been because he needed his sins washed away since he was without sin. It was not obvious why Jesus felt this was necessary; in fact, John himself questioned Jesus. He said, **“I am the one who needs to be baptized by you, so why are you coming to me?”** (*Matthew 3:14*)

And then Jesus gave what can only be called a baffling answer. He said, “**It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires.**” (*Matthew 3:15*) What is it about this baptism that would fulfill God’s requirements?

First, a little information about baptism. Baptism was not something new to the Jewish faith. It had been used as a form of consecration for many years. Ritual immersion was something all practicing Jews did in order to become ceremonially pure. It was necessary, for example, for men to undergo this ritual washing before entering the Temple. It was also used for men who wanted to become part of the Jewish priesthood.

At the time of Jesus there were two kinds of Jewish priests – the Levitical priests whose duties included the care and maintenance of the Temple. A man could become a Levitical priest at age 20, at which time he would be baptized into the priesthood. But a priest who performed sacrifices had to be 30 years old before he could be ordained and also would need to take part in this ritual cleansing, a baptism.

Interestingly, Jesus was 30 when he came to John for baptism. By undergoing baptism Jesus was publicly acknowledging that he was becoming a member of the sacrificial priesthood. This is seen as one reason Jesus came for the water baptism by John.

So this may have been one of God’s requirements that needed to be fulfilled. Looking closely at Jesus’ reply to John’s question of why he presented himself to John brings another question. Jesus’ reply – “**It should be done, for WE must carry out all that God requires.**” (*Matthew 3:15*) Did you notice that it was not just Jesus who would be involved in carrying out all that God requires – Jesus said – **WE** not I. He must have meant both himself and John.

He recognized that there was something that both He and John had to do in order to fulfill the plan of God, and part of that was going to be done by receiving John’s baptism. Notice as well, that He gave an explanation to John. “**I am not being baptized**

because I need repentance. I am being baptized in order to fulfill all that God requires.” (*Matthew 3:15*)

Our first scripture reading reminded us of John’s miraculous birth. He was, even as a baby, someone that the hand of the Lord was upon in a special way. When John became an adult he devoted himself to God’s work, living in the wilderness, dressed in camel’s hair clothing, eating locusts and honey. He traveled from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven.

His was a baptism of repentance. It would seem that John’s baptism was not for Jesus. Jesus was sinless so He did not need to be forgiven. Yet he came to John and asked to be baptized. This was a way for Jesus to announce in a public way that He was ready to become a sacrificial priest – making a sacrifice for the sins of the people – only Jesus was so different – he was not going to make animal sacrifices as was the custom – he was going to sacrifice himself.

There was another reason that Jesus wanted to be baptized by John, especially John. We know from the story that from the very beginning, from even before they were born, they were linked together. John prophesied that the Kingdom of Heaven was near. Jesus was the representative of the Kingdom of Heaven. So Jesus’ baptism by John also symbolized preparation for the coming kingdom of heaven. Jesus was identifying Himself with John’s ministry. John was the forerunner for the coming Messiah or Christ. Was this a handoff of ministry from John to Jesus? This is a likely conclusion.

Jesus’ baptism, then, was an authentication of John’s ministry. By coming to John for baptism, Jesus linked his ministry with John’s and could then build upon it. One of the accompanying benefits of Jesus coming to John was that it must have taken any doubt of who Jesus was away from John. Up until this time, John had not even been sure that Jesus was the promised One, the Messiah.

By this act Jesus confirmed that John's message was right. John called for the people to repent; they needed redemption from sin, and Jesus as Messiah would be the sin-bearer for all. Although Jesus and John the Baptist were instrumental in fulfilling "all that God requires" by this ritual of baptism, they were not alone. Yes, there were witnesses, those others who came to be baptized by John, but God was there as well. God's presence in the form of a dove and the words, **"This is my dearly beloved Son, who brings me great joy"** (*Matthew 3:17*) shows God's approval of Jesus beginning His ministry in this way – as the Messiah, Savior, for God's people. And we must not forget, Jesus was willing to accept this role, knowing in advance that the cost would be great.

So in many ways Jesus' ministry began at the Jordan River. It was at the moment of his baptism that Jesus was claimed and called. The angels sang at Bethlehem, but God's voice spoke for the first time at the river, acknowledging that Jesus was claimed by Someone special and called to do something special. Jesus began His new ministry just as many who came before him and after him began a new life of repentance of sin by turning to God. It was a new beginning for them as well.

This morning we brought into our community seven new members. Some of them have been a part of our church family for many years while others are relatively new. Some have been serving and ministering in the name of Christ for many years; others may be fairly new at this sort of thing. But all of them are beginning a new part of their lives – with us. They each wanted to make a public declaration of their commitment to this church by joining us in a formal way. We are delighted that this is so. Each one of them brings to our community new talents, new ways of looking at things, new enthusiasm, new vitality. This is how the church stays fresh – by inviting and including others to come and join us.

This is also how we who have been members for a longer time can stay fresh and vibrant. We can consider how our baptism and our membership in our church can be refreshed and renewed as we welcome these new members. This is a really special

relationship because it shows that God has chosen to love us and continue to love us even when we are not lovable. Baptism, whether recent or long ago, and church membership, whether today or years past, show that we are special because we are called and claimed by Someone special – God.

Here's a story that shows how God's love for someone and the unique gifts that someone has been given can reap benefits.

There was a man who volunteered to work on a minimum of two Habitat for Humanity houses a year. He was quite a gifted carpenter and could get twice the work done in half the time it took most people. Some years he worked on five or six Habitat projects, but he had made both God and himself a promise that he would always do at least two. He has honored that commitment for over thirty years. He was once asked about the source of his passion for that ministry, and he told his story.

After returning from Vietnam, he struggled to readjust. He had no close family structure, so he drifted ... town to town, job to job. The one thing he did have was a talent for carpentry, so he could usually find a building site that needed an extra hand. Finally, in a small Midwestern town, he signed on to help build a development of six moderately sized and affordably priced houses.

He told the foreman that he would be happy not only to do carpentry but also to provide security, bringing his sleeping bag with him and spending the nights on site. So he did that, house by house. The owner of the company was impressed by the man's abilities and commitment – and he was also aware that apparently he had no other place to sleep.

So, at the close of the project, almost a year in the making, the business owner took the man aside and said: "I want to thank you for what you've done. And I want you to stay on with the company." Then he handed the

man a set of keys and said: "The sixth house we built is yours. Take it." "But I can't pay for it," the carpenter said," to which his employer answered: "You'll find a way." "My volunteer work," he told me, "is how I have repaid him. At least twice a year I put a roof over the head of someone else who needs it, just as he did over mine."

New and vibrant ideas, commitment to serving others in Christ's name. Those are the remarkable results of ministry. Jesus' ministry began at the Jordan River. Where did your ministry begin? Where might your ministry take you? What blessings might you receive? God only knows, but we do know that God approves. Let us pray.

Loving Father, we thank You for the ministry of Jesus that began so long ago on the banks of the Jordan River. We thank You that this ministry has given us salvation from all our sins as well as an example to follow for how we live our lives. Thank You also for bringing these new members to us this morning. We ask Your blessing on them and on their various ministries. Help each of us uphold them, encourage them, comfort them, love them as our newest members of our congregation. In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen.