

Pleasing, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. E1080113

Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17

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In today's Gospel reading from Matthew, we hear the story of the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River. As we hear that story, I wonder what you think about your baptism. If you were baptized as an infant, and you went through a confirmation process, what meaning does your baptism hold for you? What meaning does your confirmation have for you? If you chose to be baptized because you were given the opportunity at a later age, like twelve or thirteen, what did that choice mean for you? What were you doing before you were baptized or confirmed? What change did baptism or confirmation make in your life?

To be baptized is to be immersed into the Christian faith. It is a specific moment at which you chose to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

There is nothing magical about baptism. It does not change one's physical structure. Sometimes in our desperation, we grasp at miraculous magic with an unreasonable expectation. "If only I can make that pilgrimage to Lourdes, I will be healed." Indeed, there are thousands of stories of miraculous healings. There are sixty-eight miracles at Lourdes confirmed by the Roman Catholic church. (What happened to the other millions of pilgrims to Lourdes?)

There is nothing magic about the water at Lourdes or the water used in baptism. The magazine *Newsweek* reported in its December 17, 2007 issue about bottled holy water. See, you don't even have to travel to Lourdes in France or to the Jordan in Israel to wash in holy water. Go on the net and click on www.spiritualh2o.com. There, you will find "Formula J Water," formula J being Jesus. It comes with a nice picture of Jesus on the label. Or, if you choose, you can purchase Focus Water, or Virgin Mary water. This holy water costs \$2.50 for a 16.9 oz. bottle. Oh, it also costs \$7.95 for "best way" shipping. So, if you believe in the magic of such miraculous stuff, you can get a bottle for a total of \$10.45.

Healing does not come about by magic. It comes about through God's grace. Baptism is not magic. Baptism is an outward and visible sign of something that happens inside. It is a choice to respond to God's call by following Jesus Christ.

Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan is the official beginning of Jesus' ministry, and it appears similarly in all four gospels. I'd like for you to come with me for a minute in a deeper contemplation of this pivotal event. Let's look at it from the standpoint of Jesus' human nature. What we read in the Bible is the interpretation of Jesus' life as it was written by the early church, fifty years after the crucifixion of Jesus. It was written by followers striving to show how Jesus was more important than the Roman empire or Caesar, was more important than John the Baptizer, and was more important than everything that had gone before in the Jewish faith. This was the Messiah for whom all had been waiting.

Consider the event from the human nature standpoint of Jesus. Here was the thirty-year old son of a peasant carpenter, living in Nazareth. This was in the Galilee, a few miles west of the Lake of Galilee, or the Sea of Tiberias, or the Lake of Gennesaret. It was referred to by all three of these name. He was living in a territory occupied by Rome. Rome used local rulers like king Herod and Pilate to assert Rome's authority. The priests, like high priest Caiaphas, were in a difficult position. They had to extract tribute for Rome in the form of temple taxes, and they had to please the citizens enough to keep them from rising up in rebellion. In the process, they were partners in the oppression of poor peasants and tenants.

What was Jesus doing for thirty years? What did he observe in the people he dealt with on a day to day basis? What happened that caused Jesus to journey from Nazareth, way up north, down to the Jordan near Jericho, to be baptized by John? Have you ever considered that? If you are like I am, you just read right past the story of Herod and the murder of the innocents, right past the return of Jesus, Mary and Joseph from Egypt, and right past this baptism story into the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness.

Something caused Jesus to make his journey. Perhaps he was yearning for more spiritual depth to his life. Perhaps he was tired of being a carpenter. Was it peer pressure or a request from his mother? “Jesus, I think you ought to straighten your life out. Go down to Jericho and hear what that man John has to say. I think you ought to get baptized.”

What happened in your life to cause you to choose to be baptized or confirmed into the Christian faith? This story of Jesus’ baptism is the story of God’s call to Jesus to serve God and God’s people. Jesus chose to become a disciple of John the Baptizer. John was quite frank in his message to people to follow God’s ways of justice and righteousness. John chose to follow God, to please God, rather than humans. He said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”¹ He told King Herod— he went right up to the king and said, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”²

But, people like John who speak out for justice and equal treatment are sidelined and sometimes even put to death. John paid for his preaching with his life. Herod had him killed.

Jesus came to the Jordan to become a disciple, but as he followed John, he grew. He listened to what John said. When John was executed, Jesus went to work. He found his own voice. He discovered his own ministry as he responded to God’s call. He chose to please God, rather than humans.

Can we please God? God’s voice rang out over the Jordan River on that day, “You are my child, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Matthew likens Jesus to God’s servant spoken of by Second Isaiah. In Isaiah, God says, “Here is my servant...in whom my soul delights.”³ Jesus delighted God by his faithful and outspoken ministry.

Can we delight God? If we have God’s spirit in us, we will bring forth justice to the nations and in our own community. We don’t have to shout or yell about it, and we don’t have to break people who are already bruised. The faithful servant will not put out the embers of a dimly burning wick. Instead, the servant will nurture and gently prod the spirit of distressed individuals. God’s servant will faithfully bring forth justice.

We, as God’s servants, will not faint or be crushed, but will continue in spite of the opposition, in spite of the voices and actions of those who would sideline us.

God is calling you, just as he called John and just as he called Jesus. Will you serve God? Will you choose to please God rather than humans? Remember your baptism. It may have taken place many years ago, but each day you must choose to renew your baptism. Each day you must choose to please God rather than humans. Each day, you must choose to follow Jesus Christ. May you one day hear the words, “You are my child, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

¹Matthew 3:2

²Mark 6:18

³Isaiah 42:1