

Matthew 3:1-17: Inaugural Events: John & Baptism

Introduction:

Friends!

Last week we read as Mathew presented to us some key scenes around Jesus' infancy and his childhood. Today we're jumping ahead decades, twenty years or so. Jesus is almost 30 now. Matthew doesn't feel any pressure to tell us what's happened in Jesus' life to this point; we're meant to assume a normal, typical, growing up.

But something's different in Jesus' life, definitely. By this point he should have been married; it's more than likely his younger brothers already are. He's around a decade older than Joseph was when Jesus was born. He's breaking social patterns, community standards.

And this atypical way of life, this outside-the-boundaries pattern that we see in Jesus is what sets him up for today.

You know, there are people you expect to do weird things; we may not like them, they may make us uncomfortable, but the whole community comes to accept their weirdness. They're weirdos, but they're our weirdos, right? "Oh, he put up another garden gnome." "Oh, she's dyed her hair orange this week." They're quirky, not dangerous; weird, but we're okay with it. Jesus, by not marrying when he should have, not having a family, these things, put himself outside normal habits, puts himself in weirdo category, but it also enables him to do things like he does today, travel far, far south of Nazareth, through Samaria, down into Judea and

across the Jordan river just north of the Dead Sea.

It's there where John's baptizing. We'll read about John, today, and this inauguration event in Jesus' life. It's the real moment when Jesus embraces, publicly, who he is and what his presence in the world means for God's People, and for those who will join them.

Let's pray:

Prayer:

John: Introduction

3 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

***"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'" [a]***

4 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

John's been doing this ministry for awhile before Jesus shows up to him. He didn't start the week before. He's been, like Jesus, an outlier: instead of getting married, he went out into the wilderness, this scrub brush, largely deserted, place, and started a classic prophetic ministry. John's taken his cues from Old Testament prophets. He's got a rough camel hair clothes, cinched around him with leather. He eats

wild honey and locusts.

And let me say, to our disappointment, John probably isn't eating grasshoppers. He's not eating the large locusts we think of when we read this. He's almost certainly eating what we call carob, a protein-rich relative of locust trees, which has long pulpy pods with beans in them that are edible. You know locust trees, right? They have those big curly seed pods that fall to the ground? Another name for carob is "St. John's Bread." Around the Mediterranean world, both now and 2,000 years ago, carob was a common food. It's a common food for us, although we don't realize it: Locust Bean Gum, a gluten-substitute and thickening agent, gets used in all sorts of prepared foods, especially candy. You'll probably have some today.

And this may dent our image of John as a crazy guy, sticking his paw in the middle of a bee's nest and stuffing grasshoppers in his maw, but John is still foraging, still out in the wild, survivor-man style, still depending on what he finds and God's provision of it for his sustenance.

John: Prophet

He's a prophet, in the way of classic Old Testament prophets. Cut from their cloth. His got a basic message: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." And he is identified by Matthew, and Jesus, later, as the one who Isaiah foretold.

In Isaiah 40 we read God's promises that someday they'll come back from exile. It's a long, beautiful passage, super quotable, you know? "Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock; he will gather lambs in his arms and lift esteem onto

his lap. He will gently guide the nursing ewes.” “...those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary.” The image in Isaiah 40 is of this long train of people who are on their way back to Jerusalem and Israel after years of labor in Babylon. They can't do anything themselves, can't arrange their redemption, but God can, because no one is like God, so they must trust him. He'll make good on his promises and make good for them. There, we read this:

“A voice is crying out: “Clear the Lord's way in the desert! Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God! Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be flattened. Uneven ground will become level, and brought terrain a valley plain. The Lord's glory will appear, and all humanity will see it together; the Lord's mouth has commanded it.” He goes on to talk about how “all flesh is grass, how ‘The grass dries up; the lower withers, but our God's word will exist forever.” It's a passage that acts as a reminder that this return God's promising will happen.

And it does happen, we know: Israel came back from exile. But for prophets, people like John, those who looked around and saw what Israel had become, a country full of people they didn't think were faithful anymore, run by puppet rulers who acted as much like Romans as they could, they didn't feel like they were back from exile. They felt as if Israel was still in exile in some way; it became a metaphor for them, an an engine to drive their prophetic activity.

This is true of John. He looks around, and he despises what he sees. It's hard to believe that you're out of exile if the

Kingdom of Rome, not the Kingdom of God, is in charge. But he urgently believes that exile is coming to an end, that God's promises will come true, that God is coming back with his people to care for them.

So his ministry is a ministry of preparing people for this. He believes that it's going to happen soon, and Matthew and Jesus see in his ministry the full realization of Isaiah's expectation that "all humanity together" would see Israel brought back from exile and God's promises coming true for them.

John: Repentance and Baptism:

So John has been preparing people for this by calling for their repentance for awhile, now. He's known, everyone knows where he is, what part of Judea he's living in.

5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

John is a Jordan celebrity. The Jordan river runs from northern Israel and the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea, in the southern part of Israel. Where the "region of the Jordan" is is hard to say, although there's some strong evidence that he was likely on the East Side of the Jordan River, in the country in what we now call--wait for it--Jordan. Actually, there's a United Nations World Heritage site at a place called Al-Maghtas, just north of the Dead Sea, where the likely place of John's ministry and Jesus' baptism happened. So that's pretty interesting.

And we think of baptism entirely in Christian terms. We can't get around it. Paul, in Romans, presents baptism to us as a symbol of dying and rising with Christ. It's a ceremony, a powerfully symbolic act, that speaks to our commitment to follow Jesus and live for him rather than ourselves. It's a necessary expression of our obedient trust in Jesus' work for us, because of course we're told to be baptized and baptize. Is it a baptism of repentance? Sure, in that we commit to turning away from the life we lived for ourselves, and turning toward a life lived for God. In the ceremony of baptism we acknowledge that we can't save ourselves, that we need the Lord. For many of us, baptism is the defining act around which our choice to follow Christ, to turn away from living for ourselves, stop sinning, and live for God is built. As a congregation, we're a part of a denominational history that started with adults who, newly convinced of what Jesus meant for the world, chose to be baptized again, even though they had, as infants, been baptized by others.

But the baptism John is practicing isn't a Christian baptism. He's wrapping it up in repentance, he's wrapping it's meaning up in confessing sin, turning away from sinful practices, and living differently because God is getting ready to make good on His promises. But there is no identification with the Messiah that's happening for those who John baptizes. He's merely baptizing people who have a sense that they've been living wrongly, and they want to try to live rightly from here on out. This was actually a really common Jewish ceremony around Jesus' time – the mikvah'ot, a ceremony wrapped up in ritually “washing” or “cleansing” yourself from some religious impurity you've gathered along the way. On the surface, it may look the same, but it's inherently different. It's different because of

the Holy Spirit that Jesus gives those who trust him, the power of God to actually resist sin, and “bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”

John: Expectations

John speaks about this the Holy Spirit. He says:

11 “I baptize you with[b] water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with[c] the Holy Spirit and fire.

This is a complicated warning John’s shouting. He makes his point that he’s baptizing in water, as the greek best puts it, but that someone.

Remember, expectation that the Messiah is going to arrive and set things right was common to Jesus’ period of time. A lot of would-be Messiah’s showed up, got some followers, and faded out of existence. They weren’t real, weren’t “THE” Messiah, no matter what they fancied themselves. We don’t know much about John’s beginning in life from Matthew, although Luke tells us plenty, but John expected himself to have a role in the Messiah’s life. He’s probably talking generally, here, not particularly; talking about his expectation that the real Messiah of Israel is coming, not that Jesus, who we know from Luke was his cousin, is coming.

To say that this someone, the Messiah, will “baptize in Holy Spirit and fire,” is to say a lot. It’s to say that somehow, in some way, this someone will be God, will be able to bestow the Spirit in a way that no one but God can. It’s also to say

that this baptizer brings judgment that John can only talk about. John doesn't bring judgment with his baptism, but the Messiah, the one coming with fire and the Spirit, does. John is, in every way, a placeholder, a pre-cursor, an incomplete shadow the one who is to come. And he speaks to this; he's not even worthy to be the least skilled slave of the one who's coming.

12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

John says. And this is judgment language, right? Country images that everyone would know about hauling in bags of wheat or grain, about beating it down, until the seed is separated from it's husk, and getting rid of the waste that's left over after you've gathered the good wheat into your silo. He uses the image of "unquenchable fire," which is great, apocalyptic imagery of judgment. And this points us back to Isaiah, too. In Isaiah 41, God tells Israel this:

***"Those who wage war against you
will be as nothing at all.***

***13 For I am the Lord your God
who takes hold of your right hand
and says to you, Do not fear;
I will help you.***

***14 Do not be afraid, you worm Jacob,
little Israel, do not fear,
for I myself will help you," declares the Lord,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.***

15 "See, I will make you into a threshing sledge,

***new and sharp, with many teeth.
You will thresh the mountains and crush them,
and reduce the hills to chaff.
16 You will winnow them, the wind will pick them up,
and a gale will blow them away.
But you will rejoice in the Lord
and glory in the Holy One of Israel."***

John, though, is turning this passage around and saying that those who think they are insiders, are the faithful ones, they're like the ones waging war against Israel. They're the ones who are going to end up being "winnowed," turned into chaff.

He's not shouting this to just anyone, though. Matthew tells us he's shouting it especially to the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees, whose source of power was in the people, in the synagogues, policing all aspects of Judean life, and the Sadducees, the elite whose source of power was the Temple and its centrality to the Judean calendar, the social and religious fabric that held the people together. We see that John's message is drawing those who are powerful at the top of society and those who are powerful at the bottom of society. They're coming to him, apparently to get baptized. They themselves want repentance, but John wants nothing to do with them. Maybe he knows they are ingenious, maybe he knows, somehow, through experience or otherwise--he's been at this awhile, right?--that they'll be baptized, repent, and just do what they've always been doing the next day. So, instead of baptizing them, he rails against them. This is a terrible way to grow a church, you know?

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

Remember, it’s a viper that first caused the fall of humanity, the serpent who tricked Eve. Snakes were terrible things in Israelite thinking, terrible things to step and stumble on in any desert place, and to call these Pharisees and Sadducees snakes is to call them out for being evil, antagonists, and dangerous. He knows they’ll protest, and claim Abraham as their father.

To do this, in its most basic, is simply to say, “I’m an Israelite.” I’m part of God’s People. We say, “I’m a Christian,” and it’s meaningful for us. It means something about how we perceive ourselves and what we think is most true for us. Same goes here. “I’m a child of Abraham.” But John says, “Meh. God can make Children of Abraham out of rocks.” That’s a slam. They’re leaning into this genealogy of theirs, leaning into the rights it provides them, the sense of identity and place that they get from it, which legitimizes their way of life, their religious habits and attitude and beliefs, and John just says, “It ain’t nothing.”

That’s off-putting. So why are they working so hard to prove they are who they say they are? And John, as they’re off balance from telling them they aren’t all that, says, “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does

not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” Then he goes on to say all the bit about winnowing wheat that I already read.

Judgment is on it’s way, John says. This is his thing. This is the heart of his message. “The Kingdom of Heaven is drawing near.” And all the pride and meaning and hard work they stuff into being “Sons of Abraham” is useless if they don’t repent and start living differently, “producing good fruit.” Because if they don’t, it doesn’t matter who they think they are, they won’t be favored and blessed when God shows up, they’ll be like the leftovers that have no use, and may as well be burned. What God wants is “trees that produce good fruit,” not people who identify as his, but don’t produce anything but, well, whatever snakes produce: fear, anxiety, more snakes.

So this is what John’s doing out here in the wilderness. And one day the one he’s been waiting for shows up. And let me say, there's some evidence that the mikvah'ot, baptism ceremony, has something you'd only “need” to do in moving water, “living” water, if you'd, oh, engaged in some sort of sexual sin. Done something that especially priests and religious teachers ought not do.

Jesus Shows Up:

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

15 Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John

consented.

Remember, John knows that his role is to be a precursor, a preparer, an announcer of what's going to come. He's getting people ready for the Messiah, for the day when God's promises come true. And God is at work here. Matthew doesn't tell us if John and Jesus have a relationship at all apart from this moment. Reading Luke, we can expect that as Jesus' cousin, John likely would have heard the story about his younger cousin's birth. But Matthew wants us to see only their interaction here: John, knows that it makes no sense for him to baptize Jesus.

Jesus doesn't have to turn away from sin and get himself ready for the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus embodies the Kingdom of Heaven. He's inaugurating it in this moment. But that's just it: Jesus is inaugurating it in this moment. This moment of submission is significant.

“Let it be so now; it's proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness” makes no sense, right? First of all, it's a weird sentence, just, you know, grammatically. But second of all, Jesus needing to do something that symbolizes public repentance, turning away from his own self-interest and sin to God and “good fruit” living, it doesn't make sense. Jesus is righteous, isn't he? And a righteous person doesn't need to repent, do they?

Jesus: Righteousness

The truth is that we have a hard time with righteousness. We don't get it. We tend to think of it as a moral state: He acted righteously means, to us, he acted virtuously, he acted ethically, he acted good instead of bad. But

righteousness, just like Jesus, has a context, and the context is the covenant relationship that God made with Israel. To be righteous is to keep your end of the covenant, to be faithful to the covenant that God's made with you. God's righteous, faithful to his end, and Israel is called to be righteous, faithful to theirs.

Christians & Righteousness:

Christians are righteous, too. As we trust in Jesus' faithfulness, we're considered "righteous," faithful to what God asks of us. As Paul puts it, we don't have "a righteousness of [our] own that comes from the law, but that which is through [the faithfulness of] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith." What Paul means is that our righteousness, our faithfulness to the covenant relationship with God, doesn't come through obedience to the Old Testament law; it comes simply through our trust in Jesus' work.

We forget that we've been brought into a Jewish thing, brought into God's People, and while our righteousness, our covenant faithfulness doesn't depend on following the law, it does depend on trusting Jesus. We're a part of a new covenant, a new committed relationship that God has worked out with humanity, and our side of it is to trust Jesus. As we go, living in the power of the gift of the Holy Spirit, we bear fruit in the world--the "good fruit" God's always asked his people to bear.

"It's Proper"

So does Jesus need to repent? No. Instead, both he and John seem to believe that they are doing what the covenant of God requires of them to do. That by being baptized Jesus is

being faithful to the transition God has laid out between his ministry, and the time before it. The proper path that the covenant needs to take, and Jesus is getting in line with it. Matthew, and every gospel--Jesus himself--speaks to John's critical role as a preparer of people, the one who in some real way facilitates the transition from the Old Covenant to the New, from the time before God's Promises came true to their coming true in Jesus. When Jesus says "let it be so now," he implies that there will come a time when "now" is over, and John will need to come back around his way and submit to his authority, just as Jesus, right now, is submitting to the special role John's playing. It's righteous for John to baptize Jesus, it's righteous for Jesus to take part in a mikvah'ot that is, for him, a ceremony of transition. In a way it's not for anyone else.

And you know, baptism is a ceremony of transition for us, too, although not in quite the same way. We take off our old self, and put on our new self, we turn away from the life we lived before and commit to living for the Lord. We die and rise again--a metaphor, a symbol, but a powerful one, something like my wedding ring--if I lost it, I'd still be married, but I'd feel it's loss painfully, and people interested in me in any way would notice if I didn't have it.

We'll see John again, Jesus says about him, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." He's important, but he's important as a hander-off of how God worked through his people before Jesus stepped out in ministry. And we know from elsewhere that John understands this. He says, "He must increase and I must decrease."

Confirmation:

And Jesus is baptized:

16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

We can get lost in the weeds here. Did only Jesus see the Spirit "like a dove" descending on him? Did anyone else? And it sounds like everyone heard God's voice, but why did they not all also see the Spirit, if in fact they didn't. And "like a dove" is a metaphor: Does Matthew mean the Spirit came down in the literal form of a dove, or just like, gently, or, if you've ever seen a dove land, they do kinda just flop into place, so what did this look like? Who knows? Artists like to show a dove-shaped ball of light floating down onto Jesus' head. Okay. I don't mind that.

But this scene is Jesus' inauguration. The Spirit settles on him the way you'd set a crown on a king's head. God testifies in apparently a way all can hear to Jesus' special place in creation. The King of the Jews we talked about last week is crowned.

What we ought to notice, I think, is that when Jesus first takes up his responsibility as the Messiah to inaugurate the Kingdom of Heaven, he is publicly affirmed by God. It seems as if everyone hears the voice, whether or not they all see the Spirit descend on him in this unusual way. They hear God say God loves him, hear God claim him as his Son, the

bearer of his rights and responsibilities and power in the world. And God says “with him I am well pleased.”

God doesn't need to say that, you know? But it's an affirmation that, I think, goes in two directions. It's got impact for Jesus and for those around him. For those around him, they're given something to hold onto, this voice of God, when Jesus begins to shake up what they think is normal faithful living. “No,” they can say to their doubts, “God is really happy with Jesus.” This Messiah who revitalizes everything they know about living faithfully and refreshes everything they know about what pleases God, does please God. They can take their cues from him, and God will feel about them the way God feels about Jesus. And for Jesus, who is revealing himself for who he really is, and in this choice, setting a course for his life that will inevitably lead to ever-growing crowds of powerful antagonists, and his death, he's got to know: “I make God happy. The things I'm doing bring God pleasure. God loves me. I am his son.” He has to believe these things, know them so fully that he can continue in what God asks of him no matter how difficult his days get. And they get difficult from the get-go.

Conclusions: Identity

And this is one of the great conclusions we need to take away from this morning. We can feel all sorts of things, and feelings change depending on what we've eaten or how much sleep we got. Feelings are so subjective, but objectively, God was really pleased with Jesus. For those of us who are always wondering if we're pleasing to God, we are. We're Christ's. In our baptisms, we've “put him on,” as Paul puts it. We've brought into God's family, are Jesus' siblings, and what is true of Jesus is true of us, and if we

could hear a voice from heaven, it'd say, "This is my child whom I love: She--or He--brings me great pleasure."

This truth that is at the heart of Jesus' identity must be at the heart of ours. And we must be a congregation who reminds each other of it. When we interact with each other, we do so remembering who we're talking to, who we're working with: Children of God who God loves, claims, and who bring God great pleasure."

As we live, we can try to not exasperate our Father in heaven, try to live up to the pleasure we bring God.

Do you believe these things about yourself? Do you believe them about others? Do we believe them about Jesus? When Paul says, "It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me," that's for us, too. When he reminds us nothing can separate us from the love of God that's in Jesus the Messiah, this is what he's hanging he's banking on.

Do you believe that God looks at you and says "This is my child, whom I love, with whom I'm really pleased?" If not, how can I or this your church help you come to believe it? I don't know how we can withstand the hardships living for God brings if we don't believe this.

Conclusions: Spirit

How Jesus does what he does will come up over and over in Matthew. There question of how he's doing what he's doing is at the heart of much of the conflict he has with the "brood of vipers" who aren't bearing fruit for God. The Holy Spirit, God in God's most interactive, powerful, way, was present in Jesus' conception; but the Spirit is present here, now, too.

And from this point on, we see the Holy Spirit present with Jesus in a way that is separate from every other person before him. In the Old Testament, the Spirit comes on people, people are energized with the Spirit's power, for a purpose or two, for a task or two. No one lives like Jesus lives, with the Spirit present with them all the time, always guiding, leading, helping them live for God.

At least, no one before Jesus was. Since his death and resurrection, and the passing of the Spirit onto all those who trust him, follow and listen to him, we receive the Spirit, too, as he did. We take this connection with God that we have for granted, and it is: granted to us, as a mercy, but one that no one before Jesus had.

What is your experience of the Holy Spirit? What do you believe about the Holy Spirit? These are things we, the Messiah's people, should consider.

Conclusions: John:

John was the very last person who could live a righteous life without Jesus. He brought him up out of the water, his hands on him, and in doing so, helped inaugurate a new way to be faithful. Matthew pays special attention to John; we'll hear more about his last days, soon. But the truth is that John is a compelling character. He's a transition character, and he knows that the work he does will inevitably mean that he is no longer useful.

We see that, right? For him to do the ministry he does will, ideally, put him out of a job. It takes a strong amount of character to do something you know will become irrelevant if you do it well. And yet, because of his obedience to God,

his desire to be faithful to the task God has set for him--because of his righteousness--he does what he ought to do. There's something that's heroic in theory about his work, and in practice incredibly frightening. But John must have known what Jesus knew: That God was pleased with him, and he was doing what he ought to be doing.

I shouldn't say that the work he does will inevitably mean he's no longer useful: John's useful to us still as an inspiration to selflessness, an inspiration to be so committed to God's work and the good of another, that it just doesn't matter to you anymore if you're no longer relevant.

Is there something in your life you're working toward irrelevance on? Maybe as parents we hope our children become greater as we become lesser, that they learn to live and flourish without us. Maybe there are organizations we're a part of that we hope can go on and thrive without us. In what places, with what people, do you have a call like John's? To facilitate the transition of one thing into another, and then decrease, grow less and less important as the new thing takes shape? How does God want us to live faithfully in that situation?

Conclusions: Judgment:

And there's something about judgment in today's passage that we can't get away from, right? When the Kingdom of Heaven shows up, it inherently judges what isn't in line with the Kingdom of Heaven. As we walk through Matthew, we'll discover what "good fruit" looks like, and as we ourselves live "righteously,"--that is, for us, trusting and believing Jesus--we, in the Spirit's power, are able to line up our behaviors and attitudes with Jesus' own.

But what about us isn't in line? We're just starting in Matthew, but we've talked about Jesus' way of life for years together, and most of us have been trying to live for this Messiah long before we've met. Today offers us a moment again to ask "Are we living brood-of-vipers lives or bearing-good-fruit lives?"

Today's passage is a rich one. It's got this crazy guy doing crazy things, and Jesus hearing voices, and a dove, maybe? It's not what we'd plan for an inauguration, for a moment in which everything that's gone before is revealed as precursor, and everything after as a whole new way to be human. But that's what it is. I hope God can make good use of it for us each and all together.