

Scripture Readings for Sunday January 12 2020

Isa 42:1-4,6-7 (NIV)

42 “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. ² He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. ³ A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; ⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

⁶ “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, ⁷ to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

Matt 3:1-2 5-17 (NIV)

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.” 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. 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ “I baptize you with 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 the Holy Spirit and fire. 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.”

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.

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.”

Sermon: The Baptism of Jesus

It so happens that today in the Christian Calendar we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. This is appropriate within this season of Epiphany as something special is being *revealed*.¹ What precisely is being revealed here will become plain shortly. However, the baptism of Jesus by John is *not* the same *kind* of baptism that we have just celebrated with Claire and her family. In other words, the baptism of John the Baptist is *not* the same as *Christian* baptism.² That's one reason why the word "baptism" in the New Testament can be confusing. Another reason is that the Church, over its long history, has added to that confusion with its doctrines, dogmas, and practices.³ Here's just one example: some fear that without baptism – whether as an infant or adult – then should the person suddenly die, they won't do to heaven. This creates fear and superstition over Christian baptism when, in fact, it's an affirmation and sign of God's love and grace. Does the simple act of baptism *guarantee* our place in heaven?⁴ If you look carefully at the words of Jesus in all the Gospels, you'll find he doesn't say that; neither will you find such a promise anywhere in the New Testament. And that might surprise some of you here today.

Let's, then, consider the baptism of Jesus by John; what's it all about? Even that can be confusing! Mark's Gospel was written first and he says, "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."⁵ Matthew was fully aware of Mark's gospel when he wrote his own, and he includes and edits Mark's material, and expands it with information from other available sources. Matthew tells us that John's basic message was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."⁶ He then adds that people came to John *from all over the land* to the River Jordan and "*confessing their sins*, they were baptized by him."⁷ The key thing here is that Matthew does *not* link John's baptism with *forgiveness*, only *repentance* – and that's an important distinction. For Jews at that time, only *God* could forgive sins and that was through sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, Jesus, just prior to his healing of a paralyzed man, was later accused of *blasphemy* by some religious leaders for claiming to be able to forgive sins.⁸ At the end of his Gospel, Matthew explicitly links *forgiveness* with the *death of Jesus* using the familiar words of Jesus at the Last Supper, where he instigates the practice of Holy Communion saying: "Drink from [this cup], all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many *for the forgiveness of sins*."⁹ That being the case, we need

¹ Epiphany means "revelation" or "manifestation" or an "appearance"; a mystery is made plain.

² See also Acts 1:5,8; 18:24-25; 19:1-7.

³ For example, the Church practices both infant and adult baptism. I will not address that here, as I have done that elsewhere: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/On-Baptism.pdf> . Furthermore, Christians talk about "Baptism in/of the Holy Spirit, especially at Pentecost. What is that all about? See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/What-Does-This-Mean.pdf> .

⁴ See also: Matt 7:21-13 – from the Sermon on the Mount. (I admit that Christian *liturgy* can give that impression.)

⁵ Mark 1:4. Luke 3:3 also has "preaching a baptism of *repentance* for the *forgiveness* of sins" – i.e., a verbatim copy of Mark.

⁶ Matt 3:2. [Incidentally, Matt 3:1 begins "In those days," which is very vague and could also mean, "At *God's* right time."]

⁷ Matt 3:5-6.

⁸ See Matt 9:1-8; Mark 2:5-7; Luke 5:17-26.

⁹ Matt 26:27-28. This subtly links the death of Jesus with the Jewish practice of sacrifice. (Jesus is the once-for-all "sacrifice.")

to remember that John's baptism was only about *repentance*. And before we can explore what that means, we need to appreciate John's *authority* for what he was doing.

Matthew indicates that John was a *prophet*, a mouthpiece of God for a specific time and purpose. This is a surprise in itself because the Jews at that time had *not* experienced a prophet for several hundred years; perhaps that's one explanation of the people's fascination with John and why they were willing to travel from the cities to the wilderness to hear him. In Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, we read of a divine oracle saying, "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful 'Day of the LORD' comes."¹⁰ This is obviously not the original Elijah,¹¹ but someone of his great stature who will prepare the people for the coming of God's *reign*. That's why Matthew summarizes John's message as "Repent, for the *kingdom* of God has come near."¹² Precisely *what* that "kingdom of God" – or "of heaven," as Matthew puts it – means will be made clear in the rest of the gospel. But this Elijah-figure was *anticipated* by Jews and had the role of preparing the way of "the One who is to come."¹³ And that person is Jesus, God's Chosen One, the Messiah. Now John the Baptist doesn't tell us that Jesus *is* the Messiah; Matthew *has already* repeatedly told his readers that information!¹⁴ And John the Baptist doesn't claim to be that Elijah-figure either, but Matthew later tells us that Jesus himself identifies John the Baptist as that Elijah.¹⁵

John, then, acted like the conscience of the nation and his "preparing the way of the Lord"¹⁶ involved *repentance* from God's coming *judgement* - which is how Jews themselves interpreted those old prophetic texts. "What is meant here by "*repentance*"?"¹⁷ It simply means a U-turn; a reorientation of one's life back to following God. It is a recognition of our disobedience to God's ways and a desire for spiritual cleansing and a recommitment to follow God *in anticipation* of the Messiah's imminent arrival. "Repentance is *not* about *feeling* bad or guilty, but a call to *think* (and behave) differently."¹⁸ John the Baptist isn't offering a *better* way to live our lives; no, it's an urgent message to get ready, prepare yourselves for God's reign is near – the Messiah is coming! And God's kingdom doesn't come about by us becoming "better" people, whatever that might mean, and so changing the world; no, a U-turn, or a *transformation* in *thinking* is the appropriate response because *the Messiah himself* is about to change the world. However, this act of repentance should *not* be seen simply in an individualistic sense, but as the *whole* nation of Israel preparing themselves for God's coming reign.¹⁹ Here, the public sign of the

¹⁰ Mal 3:1; 4:5. See also Isa 40, which Matt quotes in 3:3.

¹¹ Remember, according to 2 Kings 2, Elijah did *not* die but went directly to heaven in a chariot of fire.

¹² Matt 3:2. Note, Matthew replaces "God" (a word Mark and Luke use in conjunction with the "kingdom") with "heaven" because the use of "God" was/is too holy for pious Jews to utter; but it means precisely the same thing.

¹³ Matt 3:3, 11-12 and here Matthew cites Mark verbatim (See Mark 1:1-8).

¹⁴ See Matt 1:1,17,18 (and implied in 2:4).

¹⁵ Matt 11:11-15 and Mark 1:6; 9:11-13 implies it, which Matthew reiterates and makes *explicit* in 17:13. [Indeed, only others can affirm the person to be a prophet; (see also Matt 21:23-27).] Moreover, Matthew repeatedly compares and contrasts John with Jesus – 3:2/4:17; 3:5/4:23; 3:7/23:33.

¹⁶ Matt 3:3. The word "Lord" here means "God" (YHWH), as it is a quote from Isa 40:3.

¹⁷ Compare Matt 3:2 with 4:17; Jesus preaches the *same* message as John, or at least on the 'same page' as John.

¹⁸ So say theologians John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas.

¹⁹ This is also an implication of Matt 3:5.

repentance was a once-for-all-time baptism, a special ritual washing - or cleansing - in the River Jordan.²⁰

Now if you like hell-fire preachers, John the Baptist is your man! He calls out to the religious leaders²¹ of the day, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”²² This carries the image of snakes slithering away from the forest fire of divine judgement! And the use of the word “vipers” is not merely insulting, it also describes the leaders as predatory, poisonous false-teachers who do harm to people. John tells them to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”²³ *Why* is he so harsh on these religious leaders? That’s because they prided themselves in their devout religious practices and purity; they didn’t think they *needed* to repent – and John bluntly disagrees. They also appealed to simply being *Jewish!* Again, John rebukes them, saying: “Don’t think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones (here) God can raise up children for Abraham.”²⁴ You hear the same kind of things from some Christians today, “I was baptized, and that’s all that matters – I am guaranteed a place in God’s kingdom.” Such a superior attitude is dangerous; it is an appeal to a special status, rather than our calling.²⁵ John says “Being a Jew is no fire insurance policy; produce fruit in keeping with repentance,” or “Let your life reflect your U-turn toward God’s way.”

Matthew also contrasts John’s mission with that of “the one who is to come,” who will also baptize with the Holy Spirit.²⁶ We are then told that one day Jesus came to the River Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?”²⁷ Matthew is the only gospel writer to try and explain *why* it was *necessary* for Jesus to be baptized. Perhaps it was a question that he was often asked. We today tend to think of it in terms of Jesus being *sinless* and so there was nothing to forgive, but as I said earlier, Matthew’s understanding of John’s baptism was *not* in terms of forgiveness, but of repentance. I think a better approach is to say if Jesus is the Messiah, the “one who is to come,” it makes more sense that *he* should be baptizing John and not the other way

²⁰ Ritual washing was not an unusual Jewish practice; one-time ‘baptism’ was practiced when non-Jews converted to Judaism. We also can’t forget the symbolism of location here; John is at the River Jordan. It was here in the distant past that Joshua led the Israelites across the river from the wilderness into the Promised Land. [And “Jesus” is a word linguistically closely linked with “Joshua,” who was Moses’ successor. Moreover, the word “wilderness” is used in Matt 3:1,3.] God brought that event about and God is now doing a new thing at this same location. John the Baptist would soon baptize Jesus, who – in Matthew’s gospel – also went to Egypt and returned (Matt 2:13-23). He eventually came back to live in Nazareth (not Bethlehem). After Jesus’ baptism he was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days, mirroring the Israelites wandering for 40 years in the wilderness. Unlike those Israelites, Jesus did *not* succumb to temptation! Jesus, then, is likened to a new “Israel,” the Messiah being representative of God’s new covenant community. Indeed, Christian baptism signifies being a part of that new community of God’s people.

²¹ Specifically, to the Pharisees and Sadducees, see Matt 3:7-12. (Luke has this addressed to *all* the “crowds”; Mark is silent.)

²² Matt 3:7b. The apocalyptic images of an “ax at the foot of the tree” and of “winnowing” are also of judgement; 3:10,12.

²³ Matt 3:8. Matthew doesn’t specify exactly what that means here, although Luke does - see Luke 3:10-14.

²⁴ Matt 3:9. (See also Ezek 11:19 where he speaks of having a new *heart* for God, given by his Spirit.)

²⁵ It is such a presumption that can lead to anti-Semitism and the persecution of other minorities.

²⁶ Matt 3:11-12. And with “fire.” Again, *John’s* understanding of the Messiah’s mission was one of judgement; see Matt 11:1-15. For more on “baptism in the Spirit,” See Acts 2.

²⁷ Matt 3:13-14.

around. Jesus replies, “Permit it now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”²⁸ This peculiar phrase simply means that Jesus’ baptism is his public act of *submission and obedience to God*.²⁹ Moreover, Jesus is expressing his *solidarity with the people* he came to save, *not* with the religious elite who don’t think they need to repent! And Matthew’s *readers* already know Christ’s mission *is* to “*save his people from their sins*” because that’s what the angel told a troubled Joseph earlier.³⁰ We can therefore be *sure* that God is going to fulfil his purposes and that his ancient promises have *not* been forgotten. The rest of the gospel will tell us how all this works out. But it begins with Jesus humbly identifying himself with God’s people, sharing in their life and ultimately dying in their place. We have no idea if Jesus himself knew of his identity at the time. But we do know that as he submits to God through the action of baptism, something dramatic happens. First there is a *sign* of God’s empowering Spirit coming upon Jesus “like a dove,”³¹ indicating that God’s coming judgement will *not* be achieved through a warlike or a vindictive spirit, but by making *peace*. And that is accompanied by a divine voice from heaven saying, “*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*”³² These public words of affirmation are not only beautiful to hear, especially at a time of baptism, but echoes Old Testament texts that identify Jesus with the Messiah, God’s Chosen One.³³ The heavens opened – something that was previously hidden is made plain and public; *what an epiphany!*

I said at the beginning that John’s baptism is not the same as *Christian* baptism - although it certainly has its roots there. The world-wide church links baptism with the *dying and raising of Christ*.³⁴ The descent *into* water signifies the person’s identification with the suffering and death of Jesus, whereby the power that sin has in the old way of life is broken, and the ascent *from* the water signifies participation in the new life of the Spirit³⁵ - based on the power of the resurrection. It is also a welcoming promise as we become members of a new family and citizens of God’s new society.³⁶ That is what has happened to Claire this morning - and at our own baptisms. But there *is* an important *connection* between Christian baptism and John’s baptism that we can’t overlook. All four gospel’s have Christ’s baptism near their beginning. Baptism is therefore *not* the end of the process and so we can all sit back and relax, affirmed in the knowledge that God loves us. No, baptism is also a public *commissioning*³⁷ and the *start* of the journey. May we therefore be obedient, like Jesus, as we follow in his footsteps, confident that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even death itself. Amen.

²⁸ Matt 3:15. That is the literal Greek, rather than “Let it be so now.” [“Righteousness” is a key word in Matthew.]

²⁹ “righteousness” in this context is not a legal status before God (or a sinner in need of forgiveness), but an aspect of *discipleship*. There was *no* scriptural expectation that the Messiah needed to be baptised.

³⁰ Matt 1:21. Jesus as Messiah is also a representative for Israel. Note, Matthew does not speculate on what went on in the mind of Jesus. He does not encourage the reader to question of whether Jesus already knew his identity. Given Matt 1:21, Jesus *already* had that role regardless of the events of his baptism.

³¹ Matt 3:16. See also Isa 11:1-5; 42:1. Some scholars suggest this has parallels with Gen 1:2.

³² Matt 3:17. Mark 1:11 gives the impression that the words from heaven *only* heard by Jesus, Matthew makes these words *public* so spelling out the identity of Jesus to his readers yet again. Mathew makes this *explicit* in Matt 12:17–21.

³³ For example, Matthew’s readers would appreciate the link with Ps 2:7-9, a royal psalm appropriate for a king’s coronation.

³⁴ Rom 6:3–4; Col 2:11-13.

³⁵ John 3:5; Acts 2:38.

³⁶ Eph 2:19; Gal 3:28. This speaks to our *identity* in Messiah Jesus.

³⁷ This is often linked to “confirmation” in the case of infant baptism.