

“Our Righteous Representative”

Introduction: As we have now celebrated, in the season of Christmas, the coming of Jesus into time, and space, and history, in the remarkable form of an infant, being seen by both simple shepherds and wise men, and being also a challenge to the forces of evil such as King Herod, we now turn, in the season known as Epiphany (“manifestation” or “revelation”), to consider who this child is, what he has come to do, and who and what he has come to call us to be.

We’ll begin with his baptism, the event that kicks off his public ministry, the only event that all four gospel accounts include, outside of his crucifixion and resurrection. And so it is significant! As we examine it closely, we’ll see that it gives us hints of the surprising job description of Jesus, which included both Messianic Son and Suffering Servant. To put it another way, in his baptism, we see both the king and his cross. It’s a combination that is not easy to put together, but if we can begin to get our hearts around it, it will reveal to us a leader that does not lord himself over his people but one who identifies and suffers with us. He is, therefore, a leader we can trust, follow, and even fall in love with.

Let’s begin by considering the brief exchange that took place before his baptism, between Jesus and John, his cousin.

I. Before the Baptism: Righteousness Required (vv. 13-15)

A. John, you may remember from our advent picture of him, is the one God had called to prepare people for the coming of the Lord. And, as Matthew 3 opens up, we see that a bit of a revival is actually going on. People have been streaming out into the desert to listen to John, John has been calling people to repent, and many are declaring their desire to be cleansed and begin anew by having John baptize them in the Jordan River. Part of the draw here is that for several centuries, the voice of God had not been heard. God had brought his people back from the Exile, but the restored Temple was only a shadow of its former self and the people themselves, while perhaps generally avoiding the idolatry of their forefathers, were still not living like a righteous people whose hearts had become fully devoted to the Lord. These folks had not heard from God since the rebuilding days of Ezra, Nehemiah, and the prophet Malachi (mid-5th c. B.C.), and are glad to hear and see what seems like one of the prophets of old—so God is speaking again. But John perhaps also reminds them of how Malachi ended with this promise from God (4:5-6):

See I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.

Jesus would later reveal that the ministry of John fulfilled this promise of the coming of Elijah, and the opening chapter of Luke describes John’s ministry in terms of turning hearts back to where they were supposed to be (Lk. 1:17). But in the meantime, the those who heard John were no doubt a bit skittish about the ominous threat of end-time judgment that awaited them in the coming of the Lord, if not properly prepared.

B. Now, as John talked about the one to come, he described him as so powerful that he, John, was not even worthy to carry his luggage. Imagine, then, the shock John must have felt when he looked

up from his baptizing and there in the line of candidates coming toward John was the Lord Jesus himself! “Whoa,” John must have cried out. “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” As John tries to come to terms with this, I can’t be sure, but I can’t help but think the conversation might have gone on beyond what Matthew records. “Jesus, you don’t need to repent; you’re sinless! Jesus, you’re supposed to bring fire and the Spirit, separating the wheat from the chaff! Jesus, where’s your ax with which to chop unfruitful lives down to size?!” To the blustering of John, Jesus simply responds, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” To which I can almost hear a “But I won’t do it,” from John, countered by a “Yes, you will” from Jesus, responded to with a “Will not,” from John, and then a “will too” from Jesus, etc.!

C. What do we learn about Jesus in this exchange? Let’s think, for a moment, about the phrase, “to fulfill all righteousness.” A writer named Joseph Sittler tells of his experience in Jerusalem when his car broke down. He took it to a mechanic to get fixed. When the mechanic had finished his work, he started up the engine. Hearing it run perfectly, he declared, *zadik*. This is a Hebrew word for righteousness. In the context of a car, it means that everything is in good working order; all of its parts are running in right relationship to one another. Taking this picture into the context of our relationship with God, it describes a world in which all that has been broken is being reconciled to God and can now begin working rightly together again. Jesus makes this reconciliation possible by serving as our representative (cf. coin toss at football game). Through his death and resurrection—which baptism symbolizes—Jesus was identifying with us, expressing his willingness to represent us by taking the Father’s just judgment due us upon himself, in order to heal us. It reveals a leader who is willing to set aside his own ego and identify with us. In comparison with many of the leaders who we see on the stage of the world, it makes him one we can trust, follow, and maybe even fall in love with.

II. After the Baptism: The Servant King Revealed (vv. 16-17)

A. Eventually John consented, and Jesus entered the water. The moment he came up, two things happened, both of which affirmed who Jesus is and what he had come to do: He saw the Spirit and he heard the Father. The Spirit, we’re told, descended like a dove and came to rest in some way on Jesus. Even more marvelously, Matthew tells us “heaven was opened.” Certainly, this is hard to picture. I don’t think it means that a little trap door opened somewhere in the sky. If we understand heaven as God’s dimension of reality, then this was one of those times when in the very thin space between our dimension and God’s opened; the curtain was pulled back such that those around could sense the presence of the triune God in the flesh of Jesus, the hovering of the Spirit, and the voice of the Father.

B. Worth noting is that there is one other place in the Bible where we see Father, Son, and Spirit working together and that is at the creation of the world (hovering of Spirit, word of Father, agency of Son [Jn. 1:3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2]). Now, we see and hear the same triune God at work here, in the hovering of the Spirit, voice of the Father, and ministry of the Son, affirming that what is getting started at the baptism of Jesus is God’s project of re-creation, the renewal and restoration of all things. God’s original creation, disrupted by human disobedience, is being restored through the obedience of Jesus.

C. What the voice of the Father affirms is the unique way this is going to happen. Jesus is affirmed as both King and as Servant. “This is my Son...” takes us back to Psalm 2: “You are my son; today I have become your Father” (Ps. 2:7). This is a messianic declaration about the king who was going to come, a descendent of David, who would put down all rebellion and evil in the world. The Psalm serves as a warning to all earthly kings who would refuse to acknowledge and serve this Messianic Ruler.

D. If this is all the heavenly voice had to say, we would expect the baptism of Jesus to be his regal anointing and his job description to be about bringing the kingdom of God in a forcible manner. But the voice continues by referring to Jesus as the “Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” The delight here expressed by the Father of the Son takes us to Isaiah 42, the first of four passages in that prophetic work that have to do with a figure known as the servant of the Lord. It begins: “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” (42:1). And the fourth song ends in Isaiah 53 with the Servant being pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. In the middle is a description of a figure who is empowered by the Spirit and whose pursuit of justice is undertaken with humility, compassion, unrelenting persistence, and with a missional eye toward the inclusion of the Gentiles into God’s family.

E. Stepping back and thinking big picture for a moment, the Jews of the first century understood that they were a part of a great and ongoing narrative that had begun with God’s promise to Abraham to receive God’s blessing and to bring that blessing to all the nations of the earth, being a “light to the Gentiles.” In effect, they were to be God’s servant. But they had stumbled over that latter part, failed to carry it out really, and so needed one who would fulfill that vocation for them. Jesus, we see, came to do just that. But not only that; he then came to pour out his Spirit who would empower his people not to just sit around and admire his work, but to join him in it, continuing the incarnation if you will, by living as his body, his hands and feet and heart (the “body of Christ”), seeking justice for the world and its people.

III. Status and Power Re-imagined

A. As we bring this all together, let’s return to John for a moment and Matthew’s comment that John tried to “deter” Jesus from getting baptized. A related form of that word is found later in Matthew (19:4) when Jesus commands his disciples not to *hinder* children from being brought to him. Learned teachers in that era just did not associate with little children. In the same way, neither would an inferior baptize a superior. It just wasn’t done. But Jesus came to re-imagine the usual ways of thinking about status and power.

B. What we see in his baptism is that the King of kings and Lord of lords came to identify with, and to represent, sinful, dysfunctional humanity. In doing so, no one expected the Messianic Son and the Suffering Servant to be brought together. No one expected a King to rule by being destroyed on a cross. Instead, John, like many, expected one who would destroy all evil at one stroke, with the flick of his finger. That, however, would leave us having to face his justice without an opportunity to repent. Gratefully, the job description of this Messiah was one that put the role of King and Servant together. It was put together by the Spirit and the Father to enable us to come to him and receive life.

Jesus had come to conquer, but by putting aside his own ego, giving up his life, and going all the way to a cross, as his being baptized by John declared. He would conquer, not by sitting back and shouting directions, but by doing what he called his followers to do. This is the leader I can trust, and the leader I want to follow, not because I’m supposed to, but because I want to—because I’ve fallen in love with him as the leader my heart has always longed for.