

“Messianic Son; Suffering Servant”

Introduction: No matter what your career, most of us, at one time or another, have been involved in some kind of a job search. As you go through the process, you know that it’s not only important to search the various data bases by the title of your desired position, but to gain some sense of the job description – what your prospective employer expects you to do.

If you were here at the early service on Christmas Eve you heard the shepherds run around the sanctuary announcing the birth of Jesus with the words, “The Savior has been born, the Savior has been born.” In that declaration, we hear the job title of the position that Jesus has come into our world to fill. But how is he to go about doing it? What is his actual job description? Well, he doesn’t learn about this by going to Monster.com. Instead, he goes to the River Jordan.

Outside of the crucifixion and resurrection, the baptism of Jesus is the only event to be mentioned in one way or another in each of the four Gospel accounts. It is, therefore, a significant event. If we examine it closely, we will see that it gives us hints of the job description of Jesus. He would be both the Messianic Son, and also the Suffering Servant. If we can get our arms around this job description, it reveals not only what Jesus had come to do but the way he had come to do it. Even further, it reveals the type of leader Jesus was going to be. He would not be one who lords himself over his people, but one who identifies, and suffers, with them. He is, therefore, a leader we can trust, follow, and even fall in love with.

I. Before the Baptism: The First Temptation of Jesus

A. I should mention at the outset that the baptism account of Jesus is closely linked with the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness which follows in Matthew 4. So, we will be going there next week. However, it is worth observing that already at his baptism, Jesus is faced with a temptation. It is the temptation *not* to temporarily set aside his power but to act as the more powerful one, to assume his position now as the one in charge, as king. Certainly, that’s what John expected. John knows that Jesus is way more powerful than he. John knows that he’s not even worthy to be the servant of this Jesus, not even worthy to carry his sandals. So when Jesus comes to him and asks John if he would baptize him, John was, well, horrified!

Illustration: To imagine what John might have been feeling, picture this scene. You hold in your hand one of the hottest tickets in town, at least in some circles. You have a ticket to the next Justin Bieber concert, to be held at the Fleet Center. You imagine how wonderful it’s going to be. There will be a stage filled with instruments and musicians, there will be special effects like smoke and strobe lights and fireworks, and there will be lots of screaming and dancing and adoring fans. And then of course, there will be the heartthrob himself, the “Biebs,” whose cherubic face, flow of a hair cut, and sweet sounding voice you would recognize anywhere.

But then you arrive at the Fleet Center, and frankly, you are shocked. The stage is empty – no musicians or instruments. The special effects are non-existent – no signs of smoke or lights or fireworks. You aren’t moved to stand and scream but, along with everyone else who has gathered, you simply sit in stunned silence as Justin Bieber walks out on stage and begins to sing, sounding no better than you do when singing in your shower. It is certainly not what you expected.

B. That is, I think, close to the shock that John the Baptist must have felt when Jesus came and asked to be baptized by him. To John, it was all backwards and so he tried to deter

Jesus from going through with it. Jesus, bending down in the Jordan River along with other sinners? What's up with that?! Where's the fire of the Spirit and judgment? Where's the winnowing fork to separate the righteous from the unrighteous? Where's the ax with which to chop unfruitful lives down to size? John, it seems, along with many others, had to rethink the way this coming king was going to operate. My hunch is that John's reticence was not solved by a simple discussion but probably an extended argument. "I need to be baptized by you," Jesus would have said. "But I won't do it," John replied. "Yes you will," Jesus counters. "No I won't," says John. "Will so," says Jesus, "Will not" responds John, etc., etc.!

C. Interestingly, a related form of this word "deter" is used in Matt. 19:14 when Jesus commands his disciples not to "deter" the children from being brought to him. So, just as learned teachers in this culture did not associate with little children, neither would an inferior baptize a superior. It just wasn't done. But Jesus came to overturn the usual ways of thinking about status and power. To fulfill all righteousness, to make it possible for sinners to be brought into right relationship with the Father, with one another, and with God's created order, Jesus needed to identify with us, to be like the ones down in the river who are facing God's just judgment so that he could stand in our place and rescue us by taking that justice, what we deserve, upon himself. In undergoing baptism, Jesus begins to reveal himself as a leader who is willing to set aside his own ego and identify with us; it makes him one we can trust, follow, and maybe even fall in love with.

II. After the Baptism: Three Significant Affirmations

A. Eventually, John consented and Jesus entered the water. The moment he came up, two things happened to Jesus. He saw the Spirit and he heard the Father. The Spirit, Matthew tells us, descended like a dove after heaven had opened. This doesn't mean that Jesus saw a little door that came ajar miles up in the sky. If we understand heaven as God's dimension of reality, then this space of baptism was what is sometimes called a very "thin space." That is, a space in which God's dimension of heaven and our dimension of earth come very closely together. It's like an invisible curtain was pulled back and the river, the desert, and the crowds found themselves in the presence of the triune God: The Son was present, the Spirit was seen, and the Father was heard.

B. Certainly, it was not easy to describe. All the gospel writers can say is that the Spirit came "like" a dove. What we do know is that there is one other place where we get a glimpse of the Father, Son, and Spirit working together and that is at the creation of the world, as the opening verses of Genesis describe it. God, God's Spirit, and God's Word were all present, bringing creation into existence. The same three parties are present at Jesus' baptism: the Father, who is the voice; the Son who is the Word; and the Spirit who is hovering like a dove. What it affirms is that just as the original creation was a project of the triune God, so is God's project of re-creation, the renewal and restoration of all things, which begins with the arrival of Jesus.

C. What God also affirms at the Jordan River is the way this is going to happen. He does this through two more affirmations which reveal the job description of Jesus: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

1. This first affirmation, "This is my Son, whom I love," is that Jesus is the coming one, the long expected and anticipated Messiah. Messiah means "anointed one." He was held to be David's true heir, the one who would reign on David's throne and the one through whom God would rescue his people Israel from their pagan enemies. "This is my Son, whom I love," is a messianic declaration found in Psalm 2, a psalm of praise about God's messianic king who is going to come and put down all rebellion and evil in the world.

2. But then God's voice adds a second affirmation: "with him I am well pleased." This affirmation links Jesus to what are called the four "servant songs" in Isaiah, the beginning of the first we read a bit earlier (Isa. 42). In these songs, the suffering servant is a figure who has been anointed by God – God's Spirit would be upon him – for the purpose of bringing justice not only for the Jews but also the Gentiles. Ultimately he would do this, the last song in Isaiah 53 declares, by suffering and dying for the sin of the people. In the words of the famous passage that is often read on Mandy Thursday or Good Friday:

He [the Servant] was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all (53:5-6).

These three affirmations, re-creation, the Messianic Son, and the Suffering Servant, are key to understanding the whole Bible! Throughout the OT we find the promise of a great messianic king who would come and put everything right in the world. The Jews of the first century understood that they were part of a great and ongoing narrative that had begun with God's promise to Abraham and would reach its goal with an eagerly awaited Messiah. But, what kind of a Messiah would he be? That was the real question. Certainly not one who would allow himself to be crucified by the Romans. What kind of a wimpy Messiah would that be? So no one brought the Messianic Son together with the Suffering Servant, until, that is, the Spirit and the Father did at the baptism of Jesus.

D. What do these affirmations, this job description, tell us about Jesus? They tell us that he is not just a good man who shows us by example how to live. That would leave us needing forgiveness when we fail to live up to that standard. They tell us that he is not just merely a heavenly king who came to destroy all evil at one stroke. That would leave us having to face his judgment without an opportunity to repent. Instead, his job description reveals that he has come to conquer, but by means of a cross, putting aside his own ego and giving up his life for us all. He is not a leader who lords it over his people and seeks to put them in their place. Through his willingness to be baptized, he reveals his willingness to identify with us and go all the way to the cross to die in our place that we might have life, beginning now and lasting on into eternity.

A writer named Joseph Sittler tells of his experience in Jerusalem when his car broke down. He took it to a mechanic to have it fixed. When the mechanic had finished, he started up the engine. When he heard it running perfectly he said, "zadik." *Zadik* is the Hebrew word for righteousness. In the context of a car, it meant simply that "it works," that all of the parts of the engine are now running in right relationship to one another. In the context of our life with God, *zadik* means that we and all of creation are in right relationship with God and one another. It is possible because Jesus has come to fulfill all righteousness. He is the "mechanic" who, through the "tool" of the cross and resurrection, symbolized by baptism, has come to fix the brokenness of the world.

We enter into this *zadik* when we, through repentance and faith, follow Jesus into the waters of baptism and then along the road he leads us, resting, like Jesus, in the identity the Father gives us as his beloved sons and daughters, and living in the power of the Spirit.

The Episcopal prayer book has an insightful prayer, "A Collect for Fridays," which captures the journey Jesus took, foreshadowed by his baptism, and beckons us to take as we follow him: *Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.*