

BaptistWay Bible Series for December 11: God's beloved son, baptized by John

November 29, 2011

After reading the Christmas story found in Matthew 1-2, readers of Matthew 3 must navigate several abrupt changes in the narrative. Jesus is not the immediate focus of the story, as he does not appear until verse 13. Also, the reader will discern that quite a bit of time has elapsed since the end of chapter 2.

The story invites the question about what happened in the intervening years. Matthew gives no answer, for that information appears unimportant to his message of discipleship.

John the Baptist and baptism (Matthew 3:1-12)

John the Baptist springs into the narrative in verse 1. His message was simple, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (v. 2). "Repent" means to change direction. Eugene Peterson adds, "you're going the wrong way, thinking the wrong thoughts." You are living life backwards. A U-turn is in order. That makes repentance an action word.

The next part of John the Baptist's message spoke about "the kingdom of heaven." The "kingdom of heaven" should not be equated with heaven itself. The two are not the same. "The kingdom of heaven" in Matthew refers to God's reign or activity. It describes God in action. In this vein, it should be equated with the "kingdom of God" as found in Mark and Luke.

John was telling the people to change the direction of their lives, because God was about to work in a significant way. Although God always had been working, his activity was near and about to bring the fruition of the

promises found in the Old Testament.

John's message was so important that Matthew placed it first in the chapter before any description of John. And what a description it is. John is described in the fashion of an Old Testament prophet in the line of Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8 (see Zechariah 13:4). Along with John's distinctive clothing was his diet of locusts and honey. In addition, John was portrayed as fulfilling the prophecy found in Isaiah 40:3. He was the one to prepare the way for the coming king.

The people recognized John's prophetic dress and message. They came to hear him, and when they heard, they received a baptism of repentance. In other words, they obeyed the message they heard. They followed John and, in a sense, were his disciples. Since they were followers of the one preparing the way for Jesus, it would be easy for them to become disciples of Jesus, the coming king.

John not only attracted the general population, he also attracted the Pharisees and Sadducees. Upon their arrival, John leveled a stinging, even prophetic style, criticism against them. He accused them of trusting in their relationship with Abraham to protect them instead of repentance.

Modern readers of Matthew 3 want to identify with the people coming to John through repentance and baptism. For those who have attended church for a number of years, the Pharisees and Sadducees stand as a litmus test concerning repentance. If genuine repentance has not been a part of a person's life in recent months, then in what way is that person dissimilar to the Pharisees and Sadducees? Has that person achieved the level of perfection? Certainly many Pharisees and Sadducees thought they had.

Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:13-17)

In Matthew 3:13, Jesus returns as the focus of the story. He came to the Jordan River in order to be baptized by John. Why would Jesus need John's

baptism, since John's baptism signified repentance in an individual's life? Surely, Jesus did not need to repent, and if he did, repent from what?

John recognized the situation and said Jesus should be the one doing the baptism and not John. Jesus replied he needed John's baptism in order "to fulfill all righteousness." More than likely Jesus was wanting to identify with the people who were receiving the baptism. In other words, Jesus was saying that in order to be an obedient disciple, one must receive baptism. Jesus' answer satisfied John's inhibitions, and he baptized Jesus.

At that moment, "heaven was opened," signifying a divine message was about to be uttered. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." The voice confirmed Jesus was fulfilling "all righteousness."

More than that, the voice was testifying to everyone of heaven's affirmation concerning Jesus' baptism. Notice the voice did not address Jesus, as it did in Mark and Luke. Here, everyone is addressed. The message to follow Jesus is for everyone to hear and to obey.

Why do Baptists baptize? As noted in this passage, any believer should want to be righteous and thus be baptized. Believers want to obey the command of Jesus in baptizing new believers (Matthew 28:19). Baptism can be viewed as the initiation rite of Christians.

Finally, the book of Acts shows that baptism is the public confession of new believers. Through the simple act of baptism, believers identify with and believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (See Acts 2:41; 8:38; 18:8; 19:5, and Romans 6:1-4).

To be a disciple of Jesus means to be like Jesus, to do what he did. The first step in being like Jesus is baptism.