

BaptistWay: The introduction of the King

November 27, 2015

- *The BaptistWay lesson for Dec. 13 focuses on Matthew 3.*

An immense gap of time occurs between chapters 2 and 3. We left the second chapter with a Jesus who may have been 2 or 3 years old. Now we find ourselves confronted by a grizzled man who is “preaching in the wilderness” (v. 1). His name is John the Baptist. Of course, the text does not state that John was the first Baptist, or that he is in any way an ancestor to the contemporary group of Christians known as Baptists.

In fact, to avoid such confusion, some translations, such as *The Message*, use the word “baptizer” instead. That is, John is the one baptizing people in the wilderness. Other Christian brothers and sisters, such as the Eastern Orthodox tradition, regard this biblical person as “John the Forerunner.” Regardless, for Matthew—as for the other synoptic Gospels—John embodies and fulfills the words of the prophet Isaiah as the one who cries, “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him” (v. 3).

Announcing the coming of Messiah

In short, John announces the coming of the Messiah. As if this were not enough, Matthew depicts John and his attire in a manner that should remind us of Elijah the Tishbite in the Old Testament (2 Kings 1:8), as well as the concluding words of the book of Malachi: “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes” (Malachi 4:5). In other words, John the Baptist is this returned Elijah, heralding the arrival of a new work by God “in those days” (v. 1).

And yet, John’s method of announcing this news is very odd. First, he is

baptizing people in the Jordan River. Matthew tells us people came from “Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan” to see John (v. 5). When he sees the Pharisees and Sadducees, the acclaimed religious teachers of the day, on the shoreline, John calls them vipers and warned they were near to being burned in the fire (vv. 7-10). Even their ethnic heritage is not a guarantee of security or righteousness, since God is capable of creating a new people descended from Abraham if necessary (v. 9). Such words not only divide John from these teachers, but they set the stage for all parties’ interaction with the Messiah when he appears.

At this point, the text also challenges our contemporary understanding of sin and baptism, where both are described as personal and related to the individual. The text states John is “in the wilderness.” This is not merely a description of the terrain; it calls to memory Israel’s shared time in the wilderness after the exit from Egypt. In this experience, they became the people of God rather than a ragtag band of individual Hebrews.

Passing through the waters

Moreover, with this in mind, John’s baptism is not only for individual sins, but for the ways in which the collective people of Israel has failed to keep the covenant with Yahweh. Recall that Israel had passed through the waters on two other occasions—during the Exodus through the sea and when they entered the Promised Land through this same River Jordan. Both events were communal happenings, involving all of the people in their risks and rewards. Thus, we ought to take John’s voice seriously as he calls the people of God to collective repentance.

When Jesus, now full-grown, arrives on the scene, he requests baptism from John (v. 13). John initially refuses, likely because he thinks the baptizer should be greater than the one being baptized. In John’s mind, this is not the case with Jesus, since John already has stated: “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” (v. 11). Since Jesus and his baptism are greater than John and his baptism, the prophet replies, “I need to be baptized by you” (v. 14). However, Jesus, the one who will “save his people from their sins” (1:21), now identifies himself with those people by passing through the waters with them. This may be Jesus’ intent by saying John’s baptism is significant for fulfilling “all righteousness” (v. 15). That is, Christ has placed himself within God’s covenant with Israel and its renewal, grounding his work in the hope of fulfilling it in his life—and death.

Theophany

What happens next is a theophany—an appearance of God—that marks one of the most prominent depictions of the Triune God within the New Testament. As Jesus emerges from the water, the Spirit of God descends like a dove, and a voice from heaven quotes a royal psalm in declaring: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (vv. 16-17). This image affirms Jesus as the rightful king, and the presence of the entire Godhead serves to remind us this Gospel is not a tale about Jesus alone. Indeed, where Jesus is present throughout this story, all persons of the Trinity also are active in love and power.