

What Really Happened at the River Jordan?
Isaiah 42: 1-9, Acts 10: 34-43, Matthew 13:13-17
January 13, 2008

I enjoy an occasional mystery story. Let me begin by posing a short mystery question emerging from a true story. A boy and his father were out in the car one evening and suffered a horrible car accident. The father was killed instantly in the accident and the boy was life-flighted to area hospital. Immediately whisked into emergency surgery the neurosurgeon scrubbed and entered the operating room. The surgeon took one look at the boy and said, "I cannot operate on this boy. This is my son." Now how is this possible? This is a smart group. Of course, the surgeon was the boy's mother. It is amazing how our perspective can't be clouded by our assumptions about reality, isn't it?

One of the interesting facets of our Christian tradition is that we have multiple stories or witnesses about the One who we follow, that is, Jesus. Those are the gospel witnesses of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Particularly among the synoptic writers of Matthew, Luke and John, where we see the same stories presented, it is interesting to compare and contrast the stories from the perspectives of these writers and what they were focused in presenting. There are few stories presented in all the gospel narratives more interesting in examining the differences than the baptism of Jesus. These differences demand that we ask the question, "what really happened at the River Jordan?" Now most scholars believe that Mark was the first gospel of our canon that was written down from the oral testament of the life of Jesus. Mark probably heard the story from Peter who heard it from someone else, for we don't think Peter was there at the river because he had yet to be called. Jesus comes from Nazareth and was immersed by John in

the river Jordan (o.k. you win Southern Baptists). Then a supernatural tearing apart of the heavens occurred and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove on Jesus. God speaks directly to Jesus, revealing his purpose, “You are my son, in whom I am well pleased.” That works for me. A personal God reveals directly to Jesus the plan for the world.

Luke’s gospel comes years later and we believe that both Luke and Matthew had a copy of Mark to base their own witness upon. Luke makes the same geographical reference to his coming from Galilee, but the emphasis is that Jesus’ baptism is part of a kind of community baptism as Jesus is baptized at about the same time as all the others in the community. The line, “you are my son,” reappears in a powerful, personal way speaking to Jesus directly of his mission, equipped by the spirit.

The major difference in these stories comes in Matthew’s gospel. Matthew presents the highest Christology of Jesus. Obviously, Jesus was without sin; he didn’t need cleansing. Baptism, in the Jewish tradition, was a cleansing of sin, similar to John the Baptist’s notion of baptism. How do you explain this embarrassing little event? Jesus has to intervene, saying, “let it be so, for this is necessary to fulfill all righteousness.” In other words, do this as I will be the propitiation for all humanity. Hence atonement theory is born. Further, God’s revealing of Jesus divine mission is proclaimed to all in attendance (including the gentle reader), “This” is my beloved. Matthew becomes the Christian testament equivalent of Isaiah.

Now one of the interesting witnesses to the baptism of Jesus that we don’t have in our Bible is known as the Gospel of the Hebrews. It adds a beautiful kind of postscript to God inspiring its speaker in the following line: “My son, in all the prophets I was waiting for you, that you might come, and that I might rest in you. For you are my rest; and you

are my firstborn son, who reigns forever.” Now isn’t that interesting...but it probably adds a heresy or two that we just don’t have the time to deal with this morning.

So what really happened at the River Jordan? We didn’t have a movie camera. We don’t have DNA. We just have the texts and competing texts at that. We also have other scriptural witnesses, such as the foreshadowing of Jesus’ ministry in the passages from Isaiah that we collectively know as the “Servant Songs.” One of these four texts is our lectionary text that we have this morning. I believe in that moment of divine revelation, in the moment of Jesus’ baptism, that poetry from Isaiah would have been very much in the mind of Jesus in his self-understanding. What I think we can piece together from this puzzle of scripture that lay before us like ancient scraps of parchment are these conclusions. These also happen to be what I think we can conclude about our own baptism as modern followers of this one named Jesus:

1. The Spirit descended on Jesus in a powerful way – the dove of a Spirit moved in him in a powerful way, in a serene kind of way, that convinced of his mission of transforming the social fabric of Judaism.
2. Jesus’ prophetic witness was felt by him and others in a powerful way and we share that call in our own baptism. Luke presents this best, that is, that baptism is an intensely corporate event and we remember our baptism not just as a personal event but one that unites us as a congregation and as an entire people. It is like that experience like when one unites with Bering for the first time, especially by profession of faith, and we affirm our own vows with one common voice.
3. That the call includes spreading justice to every corner of the world. Jesus’ baptism and our own baptism should represent a radical turn in our life as

individuals as we connect to the body of Christ. Our continuing growth in Christ I believe is most punctuated by social action and in participating in the power of the Spirit in interrupting evil systems and in turning them around to be shaped by the realm of God in the world.

4. Justice is defined as “doing the right thing” for the other, as the “servant” shows us in the Isaiah passage. Baptism is a call to each of us to join with Christ in promoting compassion to the helpless, righteousness to all of our sisters and brothers, and justice for all of the created order.

In our local media in current days the news has been dominated by the Harris County District Attorney scandal. Mr. Rosenthal has seemed like a caricature of smugness, political arrogance and a refusal to impose the same tough standard of justice upon himself as he has on the poorest in the criminal justice system over which he exerts such icy power. Isaiah instead holds up the standard of compassionate justice. Notice how the gentle but steady servant would not even damage a fragile reed in his pursuit of God’s justice. This is the same personality that we ascribe to the adult Jesus. Jonathan Edwards said, “the degree of religion is to be judged by the strength of habit exercised in affection.” How different is the standard of justice in our own county, which leads the country in executions meted out to the poorest among us. Notice how republicans and democrats alike miss the point of justice. The republicans seem to be eager to mete out justice on Rosenthal, to cannibalize their own, for their fear of political fallout. At the same time, democrats, who want the maximum implosion effect, are silent so that Rosenthal will stay as long as possible, and thereby maximize their own political end.

This is not justice, only political power and retribution disguised as justice. Justice is gentle and compassionate. It has the heart of the suffering servant.

So the question for us today is not so much “what happened at the River Jordan?” but rather “what is happening to the baptized of Bering who live along Buffalo Bayou?” How do we honor and remember our baptism by converting the still and perhaps stagnant waters of our hearts into the rolling waters of justice? What captives are being freed in our midst? To whose rescue do we rush? Mr. Rosenthal will not be with us much longer mocking our halls of justice. And with him it is my prayer that the era of retributive justice that leaves a bloody trail from Livingston to Huntsville to Eastham to Polunsky to Old Smoky in the Walls unit will finally end. It is time to end the age of killing in our prisons. It is time to end an era when justice and compassion are commodities for sale in our twisted criminal justice system. Today you will get pretty much the justice you can afford. Let us move with Christ to end the indiscriminate killing of our poor so that sanctity of life extends to the most marginalized in our midst.