

January 8, 2023  
Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism of Our Lord  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Where Our Story Begins”**

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

While there are many aspects of Facebook that I enjoy, I must admit that there are times when I wonder about how the site knows so much about me. Facebook has been a good way for us to keep in touch with family and friends who live far away from us; Facebook Messenger has also been useful in communicating with people in the congregation and community. But there are times when ads and other content appears on the site that seems to indicate that Facebook knows much more about me than it should. I know that it is related to algorithms that the site uses to direct advertisers and other content to my page, and so far, nothing dangerous or offensive has shown up; but I still get nervous when a website knows far more about me than most people, even my closest friends and relatives. One recent example of this was an ad that appeared on my Facebook page for a T-shirt that would announce to the world “New Jersey: It’s Where My Story Begins.” Of course, that is true: my “story” began on March 11, 1957, when I was born at Muhlenberg Hospital in Plainfield, New Jersey. I was raised in North Plainfield, New Jersey and spent the first thirteen years of my ordained ministry serving congregations in New Jersey. Even though I have not been a full-time resident of New Jersey since 1996 and am now a Canadian citizen, my accent as well as a lot of my stories and memories indicate that indeed New Jersey is “where my story began.”

While I did not respond to that ad on Facebook by buying the T-shirt, the message on it is important for all of us. Knowing “where our story began” helps us understand our heritage in our family, our nation, and our community. Biographies of famous people always begin with their origin stories, their family and national backgrounds that laid the foundation upon which their lives were built; and even for people who would not be considered “famous,” knowing one’s background and heritage helps us understand who we are and how that affects the manner in which we live our lives. Many people research their family genealogies to help them understand how their origin stories shape their current lives; the television series *Finding Your Roots* explores the family backgrounds of famous persons, revealing details that were previously unknown to them to help them better understand how the origins of their story shaped the people they have become. Knowing where our story begins can help

us understand where we have been in our lives and how we might live more intentionally in the future.

All four Gospels focus on the story of Jesus of Nazareth, whose life, death, and resurrection are at the heart of our Christian faith. Each Gospel writer, however, chooses a different place to begin the story of Jesus. For Matthew, Jesus' story begins with *"the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham."* (Matthew 1:1); Matthew traces Jesus' origin story back to the father of the people of Israel, establishing Jesus' roots as the one who fulfills the covenant promises God made to his ancestors Abraham and David. For Luke, the story begins with the announcement by the angel Gabriel to Mary that she has found favour with God and *"will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus"* (Luke 1:31). In the Fourth Gospel, the Evangelist goes back to the beginning of time to establish that Jesus Christ is *"true God, begotten of the Father in creation"* (*Small Catechism*); John begins his Gospel by proclaiming that *"in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth"* (John 1:1, 14). The Gospel of Mark, probably the earliest of the four Gospels, ignores Jesus' early life or origin stories in the Old Testament; Jesus' story begins when Mark reports that *"in those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan"* (Mark 1:9).

Even though the four Evangelists choose to begin their account of the origins of Jesus' life story in different places, they all agree that his baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist marks a significant turning point in his story. In Matthew's Gospel, the baptism is the first time the adult Jesus appears in the narrative. Matthew has previously introduced John as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies of one who would come to prepare the way for the Messiah, God's anointed one, who would fulfill all that God has promised through the prophets:

- "A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." – Isaiah 40:3.
- "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly appear. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" – Malachi 3:1-2.

John the Baptist is introduced in Matthew as one who appears in the wilderness of Judea proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (3:2) in

fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of "*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight*" (3:3). Matthew reports that "*the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*" (3:5-6). John's baptism may have its origin in Jewish ritual baths (*mikveh*) which were practiced as a form of purification; it may also have been related to ritual cleansings when Gentile proselytes converted to Judaism. Matthew indicates that confession of one's sins was a key element of this baptismal ritual; "*the people who came to the Jordan to be baptized by John confessed and repented of their sins, in order to prepare themselves to receive God's forgiveness and salvation.*" (Diane G. Chen).

Among those who come to the Jordan to be baptized by John is Jesus, who "*came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.*" (3:13). While Luke indicates that John and Jesus are related through their mothers Elizabeth and Mary ("*And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.*" – Luke 1:36), there is no evidence in Matthew that there had been any previous contact between the two men. Nevertheless, John immediately recognizes Jesus and initially resists baptizing him: "*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*" (3:14). John recognizes Jesus as the one of whom he had previously spoken: "*I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*" (3:11). John recognizes Jesus as his superior, and without making any christological confession tries to reverse the action that is about to take place. If John's baptism is only "with water" and "for repentance," John views himself as needing to be baptized by the one who "*will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.*" John also objects because unlike everyone else who was coming for baptism, Jesus did not need to repent. While Jesus' sinlessness is not explicitly stated in Matthew, Paul asserts that Jesus "*knew no sin*" (2 Corinthians 5:21) and the author of Hebrews speaks of Jesus as "*one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin*" (Hebrews 4:15). John is "*uncomfortable with the strange reversal of roles in which one who is 'mightier' than he joins the sinners at the Jordan River and submits to his preparatory baptism of repentance.*" (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

Jesus speaks for the first time in Matthew, insisting that John "*let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness*" (3:15). Both "righteousness" and "fulfillment" are key theological themes in Matthew. "Righteousness" often refers to the proper moral conduct of the Christian disciple

being obedient to God's Will, but it can also refer to God's saving plan. In the Old Testament, righteousness was a relational concept. Abraham "*believed the LORD, and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness*" (Genesis 15:6). Abraham was righteous because he trusted God, not because he was morally perfect. Human righteousness entails being put in a right relationship before God: "*The righteous live by their faith.*" (Habakkuk 2:4). "*God's righteousness, then, is expressed in his covenantal faithfulness and salvation for Israel*" (Chen).

The word "fulfill" is used sixteen times in Matthew and in almost every case refers to the fulfillment of Scripture:

- "He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and the shadow of death light has dawned.'" – 4:13-16; Isaiah 9:1-2.

Jesus is proclaiming that it is necessary for both John and Jesus to do God's Will, which includes the baptism of Jesus. Jesus is coming to be baptized by John not because of his own sins, but in solidarity with the sinners whom God had sent him to save. He begins his ministry with his baptism in the Jordan as a proclamation of his ministry as the Saviour of all people:

- "Jesus loaded the burden of all mankind's guilt upon his shoulders; he bore it down into the depths of the Jordan. He inaugurated his public activity by stepping into the place of sinners. His inaugural gesture is an anticipation of the Cross." – Pope Benedict XVI.

Matthew presents the appearance of Jesus the Messiah as the beginning of the eschatological events that will culminate in Christ's death and resurrection. While the Evangelist does not explicitly describe Jesus' immersion into the waters of the Jordan, he reports that "*as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him*" (3:16). The dove may connote the dawn of a new creation, reminiscent of the dove-like movement of the Holy Spirit over the chaotic waters in the creation story ("*the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters*" – Genesis 1:2). The Spirit "*descending like a dove*" also recalls the dove in the story of Noah that signalled the

end of the flood and the beginning of a new world (*“He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth.”* – Genesis 8:10-11). The Spirit descending on Jesus represents his anointing as Israel’s Messiah and formally inaugurates his messianic mission:

- “The spirit of the LORD will possess you, and you will be in a prophetic frenzy along with them and be turned into a different person.” – 1 Samuel 10:6.
- “Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed [David] in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward.” – 1 Samuel 16:13.
- “The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.” – Isaiah 11:2.

The *“voice from heaven”* is the voice of God that identifies Jesus as God’s own Son: *“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”* (3:17). The words of the heavenly voice speak the words of Scripture, a combination of words from the Psalms and the prophet Isaiah:

- “I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you.’” – Psalm 2:7.
- “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” – Isaiah 42:1.

What the voice from heaven proclaims is essentially identical across the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) with one key difference. In Mark and Luke, God addresses Jesus directly: *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”* (Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22). In Matthew, the announcement is made to a broader audience: *“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”* The difference means that *“Jesus was being commissioned to his messianic task in Mark and Luke, but he was introduced to Israel in Matthew”* (Chen).

- “With these words he says to us nothing other than this: There I give to you all my grace, love, and blessing, which I have in my heart and my power. In order that you may not and cannot doubt it in your minds, I offer you here – not Moses, nor a prophet, nor an angel, nor a saint, nor a treasure of gold or silver,

nor great earthly or heavenly gift – but my beloved Son, that is, my very heart, the true, eternal font of all grace and good, which no angel nor any creature in heaven and on earth can fathom ... What more could he have given or done for us, and what greater or better thing could the human heart desire or conceive?”  
– Martin Luther, Sermon on Holy Baptism, Epiphany, 1535.

While at Christmas we celebrated the beginning of Jesus’ story in his birth in the manger at Bethlehem, the beginning of the story of his ministry as the Son of God, of his fulfillment of God’s Will as the Messiah, the Saviour of all humanity, begins on the day of his baptism, when he gets into the water with those who came for repentance and renewal so that he might become one with humanity and become the one who will save humanity from “*sin, death, and the power of the devil, not with silver or gold but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.*” (*Small Catechism*). The story that begins in the waters of the Jordan River will reach its conclusion on the Cross at Golgotha and the empty tomb on Easter morning, where Christ overcomes all that would separate us from God’s love so that we might be born anew through our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection to live forever as children of God through Christ Jesus our Lord: “*For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*” (Romans 6:5).

“*New Jersey: It’s Where My Story Began.*”

I do not need to wear a T-shirt for that statement to be true – and it is true not only of my birth in the hospital in Plainfield. As my story as a child of my parents began in New Jersey, my story as a child of God began on April 28, 1957, when I was baptized in St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in North Plainfield. Baptism is the beginning of our lives as Christians; in Holy Baptism “*we are reborn children of God and made members of the Church which is the Body of Christ.*” As Jesus’ story as the Messiah of God began when the voice of God identifies him as God’s Beloved Son, our story as God’s beloved children begins when through water and the Word we are born anew to a living hope that is ours in the one who died and rose again so that we might live in the blessed assurance that nothing “*will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:39). No matter where it may have happened, our story begins in the waters of baptism, and continues each day as we live, love, and serve as God’s beloved children, sharing the light of Christ that will shine in the darkness, the light that no darkness can overcome.

Amen.