

## **Reverend Jim's Sermon for January 12, 2025**

### **Baptism as Rebellion**

I had a friend in high school named Tommy, who went to university and found himself a Baptist Church.

One day Tommy, a Roman Catholic sharing a room with a guy whose father was the Pastor of, was discussing religion with his Baptist roommate. At one point the roommate said, "My church is older than your church. The Catholic Church was founded by Jesus, but the Baptist Church was founded by John the Baptist who came before Jesus." Technically, Tommy's roommate was incorrect. The Baptist church of today had its roots in the Protestant Reformation and began to evolve during the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Germany.

But one can understand the young man's belief that when Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan, he became the first Baptist. The Baptists who believe real baptism can only be conducted with adults and must be by total immersion, have always associated themselves with John the Baptist.

However, what John was doing out in the wilderness of Judea, and what Jesus was doing when he went to be immersed in the River Jordan had little to do with the Christian sacrament of Baptism, which came into being when the early church needed a rite of initiation, a way to determine who was a Christian and who wasn't. Being ritually cleansed with water was already a practice in Judaism, and in virtually every faith tradition, so it wasn't a stretch to use a ritual that involved immersing a candidate in water to initiate and welcome them as new Christians. St. Paul described the immersion in the baptismal pool as dying and rising with Christ.

Later, after St. Augustine of Hippo developed the notion of original sin in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Baptism became about cleansing babies of the mark on the soul that they were born with.

The rite for baptism contained in the BCP begins with these words:

Seeing that God willeth all men to be saved from the fault and corruption of the nature which they inherit, [original sin] . . .

In the rite for Baptism in the Book of Alternative Services there is no reference to original sin. The rite in the BAS reflects how the church has returned to the original understanding of baptism as a rite of initiation into the Christian community.

So, why did Jesus get baptised? He wasn't being initiated into the Church. The church didn't exist. And he didn't need to be cleansed from sin original or otherwise. He was the Messiah.

So, why did he go out to be immersed in the river by John? And why do we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord today?

The traditional answer is that the Baptism of Jesus was the moment in which it was revealed that he was the son of God. The voice from heaven, the dove, the proclamations of John were all to prepare Jesus for his public ministry.

But there is another way to see Jesus' baptism, and that is that it was an act of rebellion.

What John was doing at the Jordan River in defiance of the priests and scribes who ran the temple.

In those days, pious Jews were required to go to the temple once a year to be cleansed in the ritual pools and offer sacrifices. John set up

a completing operation out in the wilderness because he believed, as did many Jews, that the temple had become corrupt.

John believed that the Jewish community had lost its way and needed to repent and recommit itself to God.

Many began to go to John, who would perform an act of ritual cleansing. He became very popular, and more and more people flocked to him.

You can imagine what the priests back in the city thought of all this. They were outraged, and they begin to plot how to get John taken out of commission. And they were successful in eventually getting Herod to put John into prison and later execute him.

Jesus approved of John's activities. He says of him: "Among them that are born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist." And it was to John he went to initiate his public ministry.

Jesus did not seek the approval of those who ran the temple, those who were the leaders of the Jewish religion. He went to one who was outside the religious establishment, one he considered to be a prophet in the line of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos (notorious rebels themselves).

We have a number of examples of other rebellious behaviors by Jesus, the cleansing of the temple, the healing on the Sabbath, his eating and drinking with those considered unclean. And he was not against taking on the religious establishment head on.

"Woe to you, blind guides. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!" Jesus told them. "You shut the door of the

kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

However, Jesus' rebellion was not against a particular group of people. The priests, scribes and pharisees happen to be those in power in the time and place in which Jesus lived.

Jesus' rebellion was against hypocrisy, arrogance and close-mindedness. Against those in power bullying those they were supposed to be providing with guidance and leadership; using their power only for their own gain.

Jesus went to John to establish the tone of his public ministry right from the start. He made it known from the beginning that while he did not come to do away with the Jewish religion, he did come to break the Jewish religion out of its complacency. He proclaimed in no uncertain terms that religion had become overly strict in its interpretation of the law, while often missing its heart.

Things haven't changed all that much since. We can still miss the point and get distracted by externals, parish budgets, asset management, liturgical preparations, committee meetings, etc. And while those things are important, Jesus still calls us to ardently seek the meaning behind our busyness, to look deeper for the spirit and heart of our faith, to refrain from a spirituality that operates only on the surface.

The rebellion Jesus calls us to is not one in which we pit ourselves against those we disagree with. It is one in which the things we are to rebel against are just as present in us as they are in others; a rebellion in which, counter to the world's view, wealth is considered as

something to share, power is seen as something to be used only in service of others, and truth is seen as something not that we possess but something that possesses us.

Christian history is full of prophets and rebels, St. Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avilla, Martin Luther, Jan Huss, John Calvin, the Wesley Brothers, Dr. Martin Luther King (himself a good Baptist), and many others. The rebellious spirit is a part of our tradition.

The baptism of our Lord was just the beginning. The rebellion continues, and our gathering this morning is in itself a kind of act of rebellion, a rebellion of priorities; a rebellion of love and light and truth, a rebellion of the heart, a rebellion that is as important today as it was when Jesus was immersed in the waters of the River Jordan.