

Jesus had a Sardis, Too!
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Bob Stillerman
Matthew 3:13-17
1-12-2019

Luke's gospel lets us in on a little secret: John's gonna be a good man. In fact, an angel visits his father Zechariah, and proclaims:

Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' (Luke 1:13-17)

Indeed, John was a good man. He was prophetic. And out in the wilderness, he was reminding folks that Herod's way wasn't the only way. Oh sure, that economic engine was nice – Herod's fisheries, and temple, and grand accoutrements were lining the pockets of the wealthy, but his system was still sending out a tired and predictable message: things are better than people. John told the people to repent. Turn your attention away from things and back toward people. Stop following stars that lead you to cultures of hoarding and start following stars that lead you to cultures of neighboring. Stop depending on Herod's system and start depending on God's.

And people flocked to John's message, and to the healing waters of baptism.

In this morning's text, Jesus is among the crowd. "I'm ready to be baptized," he says to John. And here, I think, is the most interesting part of our lesson.

John is hesitant. I like the Good News Translation, which reads: "But John tried to make him change his mind. "I ought to be baptized by you," John said, "and yet you have come to me!" (Matthew 3:14).

I find it so human, so profound, so fitting that John has these feelings. Here is one who has been called and ordained to perform this very action – to make ready, to prepare for what God is about to do. The spirit has been moving in him since birth, and yet John feels unworthy to assume what he perceives is an elevated position over Jesus. John feels unworthy to be the person God feels confident he can and will be.

At the same time, the story of Jesus just keeps getting more audacious, more scandalous, more terrific. First, God is revealed in the birth of a child to humble parents in a forgotten region. Next, the child is SO special, his very spirit convinces magi to defy the wishes of a powerful king who wants to destroy him. And now, grown to adulthood, and poised to begin his ministry, the very one who holds this promise of God's fulfilment, doesn't usurp the authority of a powerful prophet, but instead affirms his worth and value, and asks him to facilitate his baptism. Did you catch that? Jesus doesn't say "Step aside, Brother John." Jesus says, "I need you, Brother John."

I realize it's Baptism of the Lord Sunday. And your attention may be focused on the water. But I want to urge you to hold off on wading in just yet. Because again, this morning, it's the leadup to the water that stops me in my tracks.

Somehow, somehow, for me, this week's passage isn't about the act of baptism – it's about all the moments that make baptism possible. Here in this community, where our baptisms are preceded by a dedication, there is a significant amount of time for nurturing. In other words, we commit to teaching the ways of covenant to our children; we promise to love them; we promise to protect them; we promise to see all of the potential God has for them; we promise to remind our children that each one of them has the potential to be Jesus for this world.

I think all too often, we breeze right past the birth narratives, and act as if Jesus just kind of wandered into the wilderness and found John one day out of chance. We need to reimagine the spaces in between the text. Jesus was nourished, protected, emboldened, empowered, equipped, loved, nurtured, made ready by a community of faithful believers. Why did Jesus become Jesus? Yes, God had a hand in it. I think that hand moved women and men to recognize his gifts and talents, and to affirm and support him.

I think Jesus had a Sardis just like you and me!!!

And I'll give the gospels writers a break, because if you've got a nurturing community, how do you put into words, especially in a two or three short verses, ALL of the things a community does to support its children; ALL of the things they do to make ready God's way?

Indulge me please, try this on for size.

The second chapter of Matthew ends with the flight of Joseph's family from Egypt: "And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth." (Matthew 2:22-23)

Editors redaction: Then, Jesus had a Sardis.

Enter John, stage left.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

Oh friends! What power God gives each of us! What trust God has in each of us! What confidence God has for all that we can be!

The life of Jesus was entrusted to a community of faithful believers, just as perfectly-flawed and perfectly-human as you and me. The personhood of Jesus, just as perfectly-flawed and perfectly-human as you and me was affirmed by God. The formal baptism of Jesus was performed by one, who though accomplished in every way, was just as perfectly-flawed and perfectly-human as you and me. And Jesus, who was just as perfectly-flawed and perfectly-human as you and me, was welcomed into healing, restorative, empowering, life-changing waters. And emerging from those waters, God said, "I love you. I am SO pleased, because you are my child."

God's people make ready God's world. And God's perfectly-flawed, perfectly-human, perfectly-divine creatures – God's children – are welcomed as agents, actors, creators in God's story.

This passage is SO deeply personal for me. I resonate with John. Now I am not implying that many years from now somebody's gonna depict me in a gospel. But, like John, I do have a calling, from YOU – you have called me to be the pastor of a remarkable community, something God has been creating and shaping for three decades. And like, John, I certainly feel equipped. Yes, in training, but also in nurturing, for I too have had communities that have affirmed my gifts. And yet still, there are days when I feel overwhelmed with the awesome responsibility of helping to lead this place, no more so, than when we dedicate children, or ordain lay and clergy, or officiate weddings and funerals, or invite others to God's waters. For how am I worthy to teach those, to love those, to give to those who teach me better than I could ever teach them, who love me deeper than I could ever love them, who give in ways that I wish I could give?!? Who am I to lead you, when you lead me so well?!?

But Jesus says to John, and to you and me as well, we are worthy. We are God's. And it's okay. And this world we're invited into, it's not one of top-down autonomy. It's one comprised of a lateral, flowing, equitable, just, precedent-exploding, tradition-defying, expectation-erasing love. Love that empowers us to do things we never imagined were possible, we never imagined we were worthy of, we never imagined were of God.

Sardis Baptist Church, I think it's important that Jesus was baptized and affirmed and made to feel worthy. I think it's important that Jesus was celebrated by God. But I think there are some things that are more important than that. Number one: We too are worthy. We too have potential. We too can help make God's world God's world. Number two: God doesn't just invite Jesus to the waters, God invites us, too. Number three: Communities equip individuals for the water. They did for Jesus. And they do for us. Number four: Jesus had a Sardis. And even better, so do we!!!

The good news of today, is that we are a community who can both prepare individuals for the water, as well as being individuals who are invited to the water. And no matter if we're the dunker or the dunkee, we are worthy. We are equipped. We are loved. We are God's. So let's get wet!!!

May it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.