

"WADING IN THE WATER"

Matthew 13:1-17
The Baptism of Jesus
January 12, 2020

While Jesus was living in the Galilean hills, John, called "the Baptizer," was preaching in the desert country of Judea. His message was simple and austere, like his desert surroundings: "Change your life. God's kingdom is here."

John and his message were authorized by Isaiah's prophecy:

Thunder in the desert!
Prepare for God's arrival!
Make the road smooth and straight!

John dressed in a camel-hair habit tied at the waist by a leather strap. He lived on a diet of locusts and wild field honey. People poured out of Jerusalem, Judea, and the Jordanian countryside to hear and see him in action. There at the Jordan River those who came to confess their sins were baptized into a changed life.

When John realized that a lot of Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up for a baptismal experience because it was becoming the popular thing to do, he exploded: "Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference? It's your life that must change, not your skin! And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as father. Being a descendant of Abraham is neither here nor there. Descendants of Abraham are a dime a dozen. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire.

"I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. The real action comes next: The main character in this drama—compared to him I'm a mere stagehand—will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned."

Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan River from Galilee. He wanted John to baptize him. John objected, "I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not *you!*"

But Jesus insisted. "Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." So, John did it.

The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God's Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: “This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life.”

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

A new Chief Judge was appointed to a court system I had served for many years as part-time relief judge. I liked the long-standing, prior Chief. He let us do our work and except for our monthly briefings on new case law or rules and procedures, he stayed out of our chambers and our courtrooms.

But he retired, and in his place came a new Chief Judge, an outside hire who nobody knew. The first week went by without seeing him much, but the second week, we all got an email to come to a “getting acquainted workshop” the following Tuesday at noon. The Chief said he had canceled all dockets for the afternoon, and as a postscript told us all to wear sneakers and easy-wear pants to the event.

Oh, Good Lord. The courthouse was abuzz. What did this mean? I had a pretty good idea it meant a bunch of touchy-feely-get-in-synch-with-your-emotions kind of exercises, group building, let's-get-to-know-one-another games that I and my judicial colleagues simply detested. Not to mention that we had case backlogs that were astronomical, and we really couldn't *afford* to cancel court cases for that afternoon, none of us wanted to go to this silly affair. The email, however, was explicit that attendance was mandatory.

Sure enough, when we got to the venue on Tuesday, we had box lunches all set out neatly with our names written on them. The boxes all were sitting on either very PC purple or green T-shirts. You guessed it; these were *team building* T-shirts. They all had the city's logo and some

slogan like, “Justice starts with you!” or “Nobody does justice alone!” or something banal like that. They were all size XXL.

I was on Team Green which was just *perfect*, because my favorite color is purple and I don’t *like* wearing the color of peas, especially over a dress shirt, sweatpants, and tennies. We were invited to get into our respective circles. It was explained by the Court Administrator that we would play the game, “Trust Fall.” I had never heard of this game, but from the groans that came from both circles, I suspected something unpleasant was about to happen.

Have you ever played this game? One person is “IT”, and IT stands in the middle of the circle, which tightens around IT. IT is then blindfolded and spun around until dizzy and disoriented. Are we having fun yet? And then IT is supposed to fall backwards, arms crossed, body stiff, trusting that IT will be caught by the other team members before crashing to the floor.

By now most of you know about my background in law and as a judge. You also know I hate lawyer jokes. But there really is one that begs itself when you ask one lawyer to close his or her eyes and trust-fall into a circle of other lawyers!

Trust-fall. I never really understood how this improved the court system or our collegial relationships as judges, but I did live to tell about it.

Trust-fall is like what Jesus did with his cousin, John, out in the chilly waters of the Jordan River one day. Trust-fall is what God asks us to do every single day. I still don’t like the game, but the divine invitation is not optional! We are called to pull on our sneakers, hike up our belts, and trust in the Lord’s good humor.

Let's break this scripture passage down, because it is grossly misunderstood across Christianity. Matthew cannot be honestly read without understanding his context.

Picture the scene in the reading JJ just shared with you: John appears in the wilderness of Judea in about the year 30. He sets up at the Jordan River below the Temple in Jerusalem in the direction of Egypt. From there he begins to call out, "The Kingdom of God is near!" He calls for the onlookers—mostly Sadducees and Pharisees—to repent and be baptized.

This is not an eye-witness account. Matthew is writing this story some 40 years *later*, from the relative calm of Antioch some 300 miles north of Jerusalem. I say, "relative calm," because he is writing just a couple of years after the Temple has been destroyed. There is a Jewish revolt against Rome in the year 70. On the exact anniversary of the date the Great Temple of Solomon was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, General Titus, son of Roman Emperor Vespasian, completely destroys the Temple, its altars, scrolls, Torahs, everything, down to the last stone. The Temple is utterly obliterated. The Temple priests, scribes, their families and tens of thousands of other Jews are all murdered. Vespasian is hell-bent on wiping out all Jewish cultural and religious life.

In Antioch where Matthew and others have fled, there are four remnant groups of Jews: the Zealots, who believe the end of the world is near and that destruction of the Temple is the first sign of it; the remaining Pharisees, who believe God has caused the destruction of the Temple over wrath that the religious laws were not being followed; a third group who in fear and despair, has left the religion altogether; and the fourth group, the Messianic Jews, who believe the Messiah has already come in the person of Jesus the Christ. It is to this fourth group that Matthew is writing, 40 years

after Jesus is executed, and only a few years after the Temple massacre has killed off the Jewish culture and religious center in Jerusalem.

Matthew's gospel is a proof to this early group of Jesus-followers that the temple is now in their hearts, rather than in a building. They don't need an edifice, he tells them: Jesus has showed them how to live and have a relationship with God in their hearts. Matthew emphasizes honesty of self, compassion to oneself and others in the face of loss, and trust—blind trust—in the divine.

The story of Jesus being baptized in the waters of the Jordan is not baptism such as we know in our sacrament. This type of baptism was for repentance, not claiming. Repentance, yes, but not a confession of sin or a turning away from sinful ways. This is where the American translations of the Bible make understanding the original intent of the text hard for us. We have been taught to think of repentance as confession and cleansing, absolution and restoration, but in Matthew's day, this repentance has a completely different meaning and purpose.

Baptism such as John is offering out there in the Jordan River is a ritual cleansing, of body, heart and mind. In Greek, the root of the word, "repentance" is *poina*, meaning "pain." From there, the word can go into three directions, but Matthew uses it to mean a "correction of heart and mind—an act of personal, voluntary, inner change." (Shaia, *Heart and Mind: The Four Gospel Journey for Radical Transformation*)

Matthew is trying to tell his readers and listeners that they need to give up their old ways of temple and priestly thinking, clean off the old ways of being faithful, and take on the new teaching of Jesus that "temple" is in their mind and actions, not laws.

John Alexander Shaia instructs that Matthew uses John's voice to send the people a dramatic message of hope:

The new temple has arrived. Abraham's true lineage is through Joseph to Jesus. Face completely away from the comfort of the old, face your insecurities and walk forward. Enter the water and repent. Be corrected. You will be cleansed of your desires to hold on to your yesterdays. Repent and allow Spirit's heart within you to beat anew! (88)

Matthew connects to us in this message. And, as is characteristic of him, he sends a symbol into the story, a symbol of hope—and of history. The dove descending on Jesus reminds the faithful people of God of the dove that was sent to Noah's ark as a signal that the flood was over, that land and safety were near.

Matthew *always* exhorts the people of Jesus to trust in the divine love of God. In this story, Matthew sets the Sadducees and Pharisees to represent our own set ways of being in relationship with God. It reminds us of our fears, anxieties, and resistance to change. The fangs of the vipers threaten to poison us if we stand by idly and wish for the past. Spirit is always on the move; Jesus encourages us to give up the ritualistic, legalistic life for the gospel good news heart that beats steadily and strong for a new way of being with God. The kingdom heart is the one that beats in rhythm with compassion, justice, and love for self and others. It is the one not dependent on stone temples and laws interpreted and enforced by gatekeepers of the faith; rather, the new temple and the new law is grounded in righteousness, in awareness, in our own knowledge of God's will.

Tara Westover gave me words to illustrate this in her recent memoir, *Educated*. She is an American Mormon girl raised in the most fundamentalist tradition possible, a child convinced from her very early years that she lacked any self-worth, taught that God could not possibly

love her-- a girl, and raised on a strict code of obedience to the gospel law laid down by her father. Tara eventually and miraculously broke free and claimed her own repentance. This repentance was not, as her father wanted her to believe, for the forgiveness of her damning original sin. As in Matthew's tradition, this was instead a great awakening to the temple of the mind and heart, freedom from the scriptural and cultural law that held her captive all through her young family years.

Uneducated either in public schools or even at home, this amazing spirit eventually taught herself numbers and letters, hiding in secret places late at night in her family home. Her parents did not know about her activities; they would not have allowed it. If her father would have found out, she would have paid dearly—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. He would have screamed scriptures at her for hours and then assigned her to the most brutal and dangerous work in her father's junkyard.

But she was unstoppable, on fire with the knowledge that God had other plans for her, great plans. She managed on her second attempt to pass the ACT college entrance exam. Through creative application writing which hid the fact that she had no education, Tara was accepted at Brigham Young University. There, one of her professors saw her incredible brilliance for what it was, and in a way, baptized her with his words. He told her:

You are *not* fool's gold, shining only under a particular light. Whomever you become, whatever you make yourself into, that is who you always were. It was *always* in you. Not [here]. In *you*. You are *gold*.

At the point she decided that God's plan for her life went beyond scrapping metal for her father's business, staying barefoot and uneducated, Tara Westover played the Trust-Fall game, surrendering herself into the waiting arms of God's Holy Spirit, trusting in the divine to catch her. She went on to receive not only her bachelor's degree, but a Gates Cambridge Scholarship and her Master of Philosophy degree from Trinity College, a fellowship at Harvard, and a PhD in history from Cambridge. She did all this without a single year in public or home schooling. She did this despite strong opposition and interference from her parents, her siblings, and her religious upbringing.

This is what repentance is all about. It's our awakening. It's our opportunity to trust that God has good things in store for us—that we are not fool's gold shining only in the glint of the sun, but that we are the real thing, the real heart, mind, body, and soul that God already loves. I can't conclude this message today any better than in the words of Alexander John Shaia:

John speaks to us: we need to say goodbye to our outworn inner voices and recognize they no longer serve us. Then correct our course and walk into the light—that is repentance, that is life affirming, Jesus-based. In Jesus' insistence that John baptize him, he becomes the exemplar for our own journey. The need for renewal and correction of course is inherent in all and is to be welcomed and expected. In community? Great—even better to have the support of people on the same journey.

It is a trust-fall exercise of God's designing. We are invited to dip our toes in the experience of repentance, and then lower our entire selves into the waters of renewal and awakening. When we wade into the water- the

heart of Jesus, there we are refreshed, renewed, glorified as a beloved child of God, and sent a dove-like assurance that Spirit *will* be there to catch us.

Matthew sends his Messianic readers into the waters of repentance, into an awakening and reassurance that though their lives have been torn apart, though their road is full of vipers and rock falls, oppression and loss, they do not go alone. They do not go without guidance. They do not go without God, God who is faithful to them in their time just like God had been faithful to their people all along the way.

Matthew's time is our time. The test is in the testimony of people like Tara Westover. The message is in the messiness of life, just like yours and mine.

Come to the Jordan! Dip your toes in the water. Wade in and fall backwards, knowing that God is there to catch you. As it has been, as it is, as it always shall be. Yea, *it Shall Be So*.