

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: “Here Is...My Chosen, in Whom My Soul Delights...”

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Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17

Prayer: Blessed Jesus, in this season of Epiphany, reveal yourself in our midst in the words from the pulpit and in the welcome reception of those words in our hearts. Amen.

Epiphany is the season of the church year that begins on the day after the twelfth day of Christmas and ends on the day before the beginning of Lent. It is the season of the revealing to humanity of Jesus as Lord and King. This year it began on January 4 and ends on Saturday, February 21.

How is Jesus revealed as Lord and King in this season? Jesus is revealed in several events in the Scriptures including the visit of the magi, Jesus’ baptism, the transformation of water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana, and in Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountaintop.

This morning, we focus on Jesus’ baptism. Many of you know that I was raised in a Baptist church. Baptists will cite these verses from Matthew as proof that Jesus was baptized by full immersion in the waters of the Jordan River, and that therefore we should all be baptized by full immersion. The basis here for this belief is the line from Matthew that Jesus “came up from the water.” When I was baptized by full immersion, my arms were crossed over my chest, and I was lowered backwards into the water and then lifted back up to the standing position by the arms of the preacher. Baptists would argue that Jesus was similarly raised back up by John, hence, as the scripture says, he came up from the water.

The Baptists may be right. However, we cannot be sure. Jesus’ coming up from the water is also consistent with Jesus having waded into the Jordan up to his knees, with John having baptized him by pouring water over his head, and with Jesus then returning to the bank of the river. Jesus’ coming up from the water may simply have meant that he waded out of the river onto its bank. We don’t know. Hence in the UCC we don’t prescribe the volume of water to be used in baptism. Pastors are free to sprinkle, pour, or immerse.

There are some problems with full immersion. When I was growing up, my Baptist church thought it best to model baptism on Jesus’ baptism by baptizing in “living” water, that is, the flowing water of a river or stream. And I heard lots of stories from preachers, perhaps true, perhaps not, about how they had to take special care not to lose people who floated easily in the current of swift-flowing streams — perhaps by stationing a deacon downstream to catch those “floaters” who “got away.”

Jesus’ baptism, as reported by Matthew, certainly seems more dramatic than most. First, there was the question of whether he should be baptized at all. John preached that the sinful people of

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Judea should repent, confess their sins, and be baptized. But Jesus was free of sin. John seems to have recognized the problem immediately and said to Jesus: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” I will say more about this later, but let’s just note for now that Jesus believed it proper that he be baptized.

Jesus was baptized with water from the Jordan River, whether sprinkled, poured, or immersed. Then “the heavens were opened to him.” Matthew reports that Jesus saw “the Spirit of God descending [from heaven] like a dove and alighting on him.” The dove has since become a symbol of the Spirit of God, of the peace of God, and we frequently see it displayed in church sanctuaries. The wording that Matthew employs here suggests that Jesus was the only one to see the Spirit descend. Presumably Jesus shared his experience with the disciples, otherwise Matthew would not have reported it.

In the Baptist church, and in other churches, baptism is said to be an ordinance, communion being the other ordinance. People are baptized because Jesus was baptized and because he commanded that it be done to others. That’s what an ordinance is in those churches — something the church does because Jesus did it and because Jesus commanded us to do it.

In the UCC, baptism is a sacrament, one of two, communion being the other sacrament. By sacrament, we mean that we believe that the action somehow communicates the grace of God. My own theology of the sacrament of baptism is that the Holy Spirit acts through the application of water to bring the grace of God into the life of the person being baptized. In the liturgy of baptism, there is a prayer in which I invoke the Holy Spirit onto the water. This invocation, this calling in, is called an epiklesis. Thus, the sacrament of baptism is one in which God acts to bring us God’s grace.

In a non-sacramental church baptism is something people do. In a sacramental church baptism is something God does. If baptism is a sacrament and administered properly, then one baptism is sufficient. Some churches require a second baptism for those not baptized in that church. I regard that as not only necessary but as evidence that the requirement shows a lack of understanding of what baptism is and what it accomplishes.

Just as in Jesus’ baptism, so also in our baptisms, the Holy Spirit is present. Indeed, in Jesus’ baptism, all three persons of the Trinity are present. Obviously, Jesus is there. The Holy Spirit descends and is present. And God is present. Matthew records that a voice from heaven said (given Matthew’s wording, a voice presumably heard by those on the scene): “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” This language is very similar to the language Isaiah employs in the first verse of Isaiah 42: “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 almost certainly meant to refer to the nation of Israel as the servant in whom God wanted to delight. Of course, Christians see Jesus as the servant, as the fulfillment of God’s covenant with Israel.

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Again, using language reminiscent of Isaiah, Matthew announces and reveals who Jesus is. A voice from heaven itself reveals that Jesus is God's beloved Son and that God is well pleased.

Why is God well pleased? What has Jesus done that so pleases God? Remember that so far in the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus has mostly been acted upon but has not himself acted. Jesus was conceived from the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb. Jesus was born. He was visited by the wise men. His parents took Jesus into Egypt to escape King Herod who sought to kill him. When Herod died, Mary and Joseph returned to Judea, in the town of Nazareth, where presumably Jesus spent the next three decades or so of his life.

The only things that Matthew tells us that Jesus has actually done of his own volition at this point are, first, Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan River, to be baptized by John and, second, Jesus overcame John's objection to baptizing Jesus by noting "it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

In these two acts Jesus freely submitted himself to God's will for his life. Like Abraham who left his familiar home to travel to a far land because God called him to it, so also did Jesus leave the comfort of home and hearth to begin a ministry that would take him into a far land indeed, into the very heart of darkness itself.

Jesus traveled to the Jordan and was baptized by John because it would "fulfill all righteousness." Righteousness is a way of being. It is a way of being in relationship with others. It means "true, straightforward, honest, upright, just, sincere." It is an important attribute of God. Jesus submitted to the will of God to "fulfill all righteousness," to be in right relationship with God and with God's creation, to be like God in relationship with others. And because Jesus submitted to God and fulfilled all righteousness, it is possible for us to be in right relationship with God and with others. Jesus fulfilled all righteousness to be who Jesus was supposed to be. Jesus fulfilled all righteousness to make it possible for us to be who we are supposed to be.

I believe that Jesus emptied himself at the Jordan River in order that God might fill Jesus with God's very will and vision for all of creation. Whatever notions Jesus might have had of wife, children and grandchildren, family, long life, prosperous carpentry business, respect as an elder of the town of Nazareth, recognition and respect as a faithful observer of Jewish law and tradition and ritual — Jesus gave up all of that. In the words of an old hymn that I grew up with: "He gave it all that I might live." Jesus submitted to the righteousness of God so that we might be able to be in right relationship with God.

What does it mean to be in right relationship with God? The scriptures in Isaiah pictured God introducing his servant "in whom God's soul delights" to the heavenly host. The servant, Israel, is fully manifest, so Christians believe, in the person of Jesus. The servant will bring forth justice to the nations and establish justice on the earth. If we are Christians, which is what happens in our baptism ... we become Christians ... justice becomes our work as well.

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What does “justice” mean? Oyvay, waiter, check please! Surely it is too much to expect one sermon to do justice to the topic of justice. Perhaps it is helpful in our few minutes together just a few examples of injustices (taken mostly from the prophet Amos):

- a. Injustices among the nations: inflicting war and destruction upon neighboring nations; enslavement and slave trading; breaking treaties and covenants; imperialism and atrocities committed in the name of imperialist expansion.
- b. Injustice in the nation: idolatry, oppression, trampling on the poor, and violence. Remember: God is madly in love with the poor and the marginalized.
- c. Injustice and impiety of a nation: forsaking the needy and oppressed in favor of showy worship services and complicated rituals and festivals and feasts. Rather than such exhibitions it would be better to share food, drink, clothes, housing with those who need it.

What does God’s justice look like? It’s permanent and non-violent. A partial answer: anytime people are being intentionally hurt, that is injustice. Anytime people are hurt, even if seemingly unintentionally, by systems and structures, there is injustice.

How do we get to God’s justice? How do we know when we have arrived at God’s justice?

Tough question ... we must be careful in thinking through and acting on the matter. The media is suffused with calls for justice for all sorts of issue ... with loud and passionate cries for justice as the protestor sees justice. So, let’s consider just a part of the issue ... individual rights.

Individual rights figure prominently in justice. There are at least two views of individual rights. One is the traditional view, embedded in our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution’s Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution. In that view our rights come from God and are what some have termed “negative” rights. Negative rights are freedoms from interference in individual behavior by government. In the U. S. we have, among others, the God-given rights to assemble, protest, worship as we see fit, spread the news, and more.

Some people would add what are termed “positive” rights. For example, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights lists a variety of positive rights including a right to rest and leisure, a right to an adequate standard of living (including food, clothing, housing, medical care, and necessary social services), a right to an education, and a lot more

The Bible does not specify whether we get to justice by a focus on negative rights or a focus on positive rights. Trust me, I wrote a paper in seminary trying to get the Bible to approve my view of the right political theory. I am a negative rights kind of guy.

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The Bible does not in my opinion ascribe to any particular brand of political theory. The only exception to that, it seems to me, is in the case of Marxist socialism and communism. That school of thought teaches that there is no God, and that all history is material. As a Christian, I must reject that philosophy. And, as a practical matter, it seems to me that those systems are unjust because they have oppressed and immiserated so many billions of people in the 20th century.

I share this to caution each of us in our work for justice and against injustice not to claim that the Bible is automatically on our side in increasingly nasty political debates. The Bible doesn't prefer Republicans or Democrats or Libertarians or any other party over another.

In this increasingly polarized and rancorous country, we need to be clear on getting to the ends that the Bible specifies, including justice and peace. We need to be careful, deliberate, and judicious. Remember that the greatest injustice in human history, the murder of our Savior, was done hurriedly, under the cover of darkness and at the provocation of Jesus' enemies.

We need to lower the decibel level and be cautious about how we get to justice. We need to listen, and we need to be loving towards others who do not agree with us about how best to move forward. Remember, we are baptized Christians, called to work for justice but with the same care and love that Jesus exhibited.

Amen.