

Matthew 13:13-17

3:13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

3:14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

3:15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

3:16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him.

3:17 And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Sermon: Jesus Had a Millbrook, Too!

Luke's gospel lets us in on a little secret: John will be a good man. In fact, an angel visits John's 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 is a good man. He is prophetic. And out in the wilderness, John reminds folk that Herod’s way isn’t the only way. Oh sure, that economic engine is nice – Herod’s fisheries, and temple, and grand accoutrements are lining the pockets of the wealthy, but his system is still sending out a tired and predictable message: things, stuff, goods are more valuable than people.

John tells the people to repent. Turn your attention away from stuff and back toward people. Stop following stars that lead you to cultures of hoarding. Start following stars that lead you to cultures of neighboring. Stop depending on Herod’s system. Start depending on God’s system.

People flock to John’s message. Who wouldn’t? And they also flock 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 this, I believe, is the most interesting part of our lesson.

John is hesitant. I love the Good News Translation, which reads: *“But John tried to make Jesus 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 John 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 John 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, Jesus, the very one who holds the promise of God's fulfillment, refuses to usurp the authority of a powerful prophet, and instead affirms his worth and value, and asks this prophet to facilitate his baptism. Did you catch that? Jesus doesn't say "Step aside, Brother John." Jesus says, "I need you, Brother John." I need you.

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 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 believe that all too often, we breeze right past the birth narratives, and act as if Jesus simply 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 believe that hand moved women and men to recognize Jesus' gifts and talents, and to affirm and support Jesus.

I believe, I faith, I know that Jesus had a Millbrook 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 few short verses, ALL the things a community does to support its children; ALL 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)

Editor's redaction: Then, Jesus had a Millbrook.

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 is 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 is affirmed by God. The formal baptism of Jesus is performed by one, who though accomplished in every way, is just as perfectly-flawed and perfectly-human as you and me. And Jesus, who is just as perfectly-flawed and perfectly-human as you and me, is welcomed into healing, restorative, empowering, life-changing waters. And emerging from such waters, God says, “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. 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 150 years. 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 each of us as well, we are worthy. We are God's children. 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's good purposes.

Millbrook Baptist Church, I believe it's vitally important that Jesus is baptized and affirmed and made to feel worthy. I believe it's important that Jesus is celebrated by God. But I believe 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 Millbrook. 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 beloved children. So let's get wet!!!

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