

# Jesus Joins the Crowd, Epiphany 1 (A)

*January 9, 2011*

**RCL: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17**

Susanna E. Metz

---

Jesus joins the crowd at the river Jordan. His cousin John has been baptizing people with water – the water of repentance. Only a few weeks ago in Advent, we heard John tell those gathered at the river that one would come “whose sandals John was not worthy even to hold” who would baptize them with fire and with the Spirit. That day John hurled at the Pharisees and Saducees, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Even now the axe is at the root of the tree!”

Back then in Advent, we could imagine the excited murmurs that might have rippled through the crowd. “Baptize with fire?”

“Someone so great John won’t hold his sandals?”

“Someone who will wield an ax to cut down ... what? Maybe the curse of the Roman occupation?”

We wonder whom they thought they’d see. “Oh, let’s hope someone powerful and mighty – maybe on a horse.”

Then Jesus joins the crowd at the river Jordan. His cousin John is there and only he can pick Jesus out. Only John recognizes the greatness of the Messiah. “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” No flourish, no parade of horses, no axe, no fire, nothing different. Yet.

In Sunday school, many of us may have asked at one time, “Why did Jesus need to be baptized if he didn’t have any sin?” We learned that baptism is initiation. Forgiveness of sins is only one part of the grace of baptism; but more, baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as children and makes us members of Christ’s Body, the Church, our catechism says.

So Jesus, by being baptized, was showing his solidarity with his community, his willingness to be counted among these people of God. The Word Incarnate was again showing that God was content to pitch a tent among the people and live with and like them. As the gospel tells us, by doing this, being baptized by John, Jesus was fulfilling all righteousness. So, the folks then might have wondered, where was the fire and Spirit? It's not what they may have expected. This was just the beginning. There was, of course, a little excitement – the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and a voice declaring, “This is my Son which whom I am well pleased.” Jesus is baptized and anointed with power and the Spirit, more will come. For Matthew, this is the point at which Jesus' mission and ministry begins.

After this, various scripture passages bring us back to baptism. In the reading from Acts today, Peter explains to new followers that the spreading of the message of peace preached by Jesus Christ began in Galilee after Christ's baptism. We know other stories, such as the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch by Phillip and the baptism of the prison guard's whole household by Paul, and of course, the baptism of more than 3,000 after Pentecost. Baptism is critically important to our understanding of who we are as a people of God.

For too long we understood baptism only as the sign that original sin was washed from our souls. For centuries people put off baptism until moments before their death, believing that with baptism their sins were washed away and they were guaranteed heaven regardless of what kind of life they led. Fortunately, the liturgical renewal of the 1950s onward restored our understanding of baptism as an initiation – a recognition of our status as children of God.

When we consider our baptism we might think more consciously about that beautiful verse in Genesis 1: “So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them.” Yes, we believe baptism cleanses us from sin, but even more, it gives us power and grace to accept our own ministry and mission as offered to us by God.

It's tempting to compare our baptism with Jesus' baptism and for us to come up wanting. He was anointed with power and the Holy Spirit. He went on to preach, teach, heal, and collect a vast number of followers. He suffered, died, and rose again. He was, after all, both human and divine. And us? Our baptism surely must be less. We aren't divine. We can accept baptism and then go on to live ordinary lives, forgetting perhaps even the day of our baptism. Or can we?

Absolutely not. The church reminds us every year at this time about Jesus' baptism. That should be a clue that our own baptism is vitally important. We should remember the day. We should celebrate the fact that we too were baptized with power and the Holy Spirit – the same Spirit that descended on Jesus like a dove. We might not get the visual of the dove and the sky broken open, but we are equally graced, filled with the Spirit, adopted as God's own, and given a ministry and mission for our lives. It is just that important.

Baptism should be life changing. Imagine what the church might look like if each baptized member grasped hold of and used the power that is freely given us by God in our baptism. In Isaiah today we heard these words of the Lord: "I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." We know these words were used in Isaiah's time for his community, and we now use them to talk about the Messiah, but we must understand that they are meant for us too. Doesn't Jesus constantly tell his followers, and us, that we must take up Jesus' ministry and continue spreading the good news? Aren't we supposed to care for the poor, build up the weak, and spread peace? Each baptized person makes five promises. Each of us promises to God five things that, if we take them seriously, could change the world. Can we recite those promises by memory? We should be able to. It's just that important.

Could we change the world or have we given up in despair? The church gives us this celebration of Jesus' baptism every year, maybe in the hope that it will make us think again about our own baptism. Maybe that memory will ignite the fire that smolders in our souls. That fire is there. Baptism gives it to us, and it never goes out. We often call the people who let that fire burn brightly "saints." But again, imagine what our church would look like if we all let our fire burn. Remember the words to the hymn: "I sing a song of the saints of God ... and I mean to be one, too."

We are created in the image of God. We are loved beyond measure – all God's people are loved beyond measure. Imagine the church. Imagine it on fire with the power of the Spirit. Imagine the explosion of peace and joy that could be ours. God says, "See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them."

This is our anointing.

Susanna E. Metz was the Rector of St. John the Baptist Church in Battle Creek, TN, in the Diocese of East Tennessee from 2007 to 2011. She is an Assistant Professor at the School of Theology, Sewanee, TN.