

Isaiah 43: 1-9

Psalms 29

Acts 10: 34-43

Matthew 3: 13-17

Sermon for January 8, 2023

Sermon Title:

THE PERFECT TIME AND PLACE

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Summary: Today is the day of our salvation. Let us rejoice in it.

From the very earliest time in Christian history, people have puzzled over the episode in Christ's ministry that we find recounted in our Gospel passage for this morning, viz. Christ's submitting Himself to John's baptism in the river Jordan at the very beginning of that ministry.

The main part of the puzzle concerns the why of it. John's baptism, after all, was for the forgiveness of sins, and Christ, as we believe, was the one human being who was completely without sin. There was nothing in Him that required forgiveness. There was no spiritual stain on Him or in Him for the waters of baptism to wash away, either supernaturally or symbolically. Why, then, did Christ subject Himself to it, and especially, why did He do so at the very beginning of His earthly ministry, something which all four of the Gospel writers emphasize.

The reasons we're going to explore together this morning may not be the whole truth, but I venture to say that they are at least true to the text, and that we can therefore trust in the Spirit that our reflections will be of profit to us.

I'm going to suggest that we break the 'Why' question down into three related issues. The first is why Christ did it **when** he did; the second, why he did it **where** he did; and then finally why he did **what** he did. And in each case, our answer is going to be the same: because it was appointed unto him.

Let's consider first why Christ chose this particular time to undergo his baptism.

The Gospel text itself, I believe, supplies us with the answer. Our passage for this morning occurs at the end of the third chapter of Matthew. Immediately preceding it, we are given a good deal of information about John the Baptist and his ministry. We are told how this strange figure wearing camelhair clothing and eating locusts and wild honey began preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and how his message spread until eventually great crowds of people were coming out from the cities to gather to hear him. We are told that his central message was of salvation through repentance of sins, a salvation that John symbolized through a ritualistic submersion in the waters of the river Jordan.

Why does Matthew give us all this information about John before describing Christ's own baptism? The answer, I believe, is because Matthew is telling us why this was the right time, the appointed time, for Christ to step out of His private life and begin His public life.

John was a unique and revolutionary figure in Jewish history. Why? Because before John, no Jew had ever been baptized. Why was that? Because the received doctrine among their religious establishment was that Jews did not need salvation. They were God's chosen people, set apart by God for His special concern and His special love. Cleansing from sin was not necessary for salvation; all that was needed was to be able to trace one's ancestry to Abraham.

Baptism did exist among the Jews, but it was only used when a Gentile - a non-Jew - converted to the Jewish faith. And it was used then to symbolize, not redemption from sin, but rather the setting aside of one's old ethnic identity and the acceptance into the Jewish identity. Baptism symbolized or finalized, not repentance of sin, but repentance of nationality. By undergoing it, one gave up one's own heritage, and became an adopted child of Abraham. And your salvation was thereby guaranteed.

John's preaching shattered that complacency. Listen again to what he said to the religious teachers who came into the wilderness to hear his message: "You snakes - who told you that you could escape from the punishment God is about to send? ... And don't think you can escape punishment by saying that Abraham is your ancestor. I tell you that God can take these rocks and make descendants of Abraham!"

That message was the reason John was such a revolutionary figure, and the reason he had to preach out in the wilderness rather than in the Temple. He taught that the way to God's salvation depended on something other than one's birth certificate; it depended, in John's words, on repentance, and the voluntary affiliation with God that his baptism signified.

But now, here's the crux of the matter. John's preaching was effective. Jews from all over Israel were flocking to hear it, and to receive his baptism. For the first time in their national history, the Jews realized their own sin and helplessness and need for God's saving grace. Never before had there been such a national revival, a national need for penitence and of the desire for God.

And that's why it was the right time, the long awaited time for the appearance of the Messiah, the Christ. For thirty years Jesus had lived and worked in obscurity and anonymity, waiting patiently, fully confident that God would reveal to him when the table was set, the meal was ready, and the great feast was about to begin. John was the promised forerunner, making straight the paths for the lord. This was the moment, now was the time. People were now ready to receive his message.

How many of us, in our natural lives, have been disappointed because we began some project or launched some endeavor too early or too late? I know my own life is practically a biography of foolish over-eagerness, of starting to work on the roof without having laid the foundation, and I'm sure I'm not alone in that regard.

Well, the same is true of our spiritual lives. God has His own timetable, and one of the elements of spiritual maturity is becoming sensitive to it. In 1 Corinthians, where Paul is discussing the gifts of the Holy Spirit, he mentions the gift of spiritual discernment. Sometimes that's taken to mean something like the gift of being able to see ghosts. But I think it is the gift of a sensitivity to what God is saying to us and showing us., and that it is a gift, like the gift of musical talent, that must be cultivated, in this case through prayer and reflection.

When Jesus learned about John and his ministry of baptism, he recognized God's guiding hand in the human events. And since it came from God, he knew that now was the time to step onto the stage of human history, now was the perfect time, the appointed time.

What about the place, the Jordan River?

I've never been there and seen it for myself, but from what I've read, the Jordan isn't a very imposing river: more like a creek. Nonetheless in the Bible it has great significance as the final barrier the wandering nation of Israel crossed as they passed over into the Promised Land.

In the Jewish mind, therefore, the Jordan River had a spiritual as well as a geographical meaning. It represented symbolically the dividing line between the Chosen people, the children of God, and the rest of humanity. It was a symbol of separation.

What led John to the Jordan River for his baptism of separation? I doubt John himself knew, but I suspect it was God leading him there, in anticipation of the day when his son, Jesus, would show up on its banks with a message of universal inclusion.

When Jesus entered the water and approached, John, either because he already knew him or because he intuitively recognized something about him, said, "Why are you coming to me for baptism? I should be coming to you."

And listen closely to the answer Jesus gave him. It's not apparent in our English translations, but in the Greek Jesus says, Let **us** allow it for now, so that **we** may fulfill all righteousness. Let us, he says to John, the last Jewish prophet. So that we, he says to John, we grow together from now on.

The message of universal love and universal inclusion was not contrary to John's teaching: it was its culmination. John taught the Jews that one's race doesn't matter. Jesus went on to teach that one's social class doesn't matter, one's education doesn't matter, one's sex or sexual orientation don't matter, one's rotten childhood or privileged upbringing doesn't matter, one's addictions don't matter, that nothing matters, nothing at all, if we haven't established a personal relationship with God.

The Jordan River, that symbol of separation, was where Jesus chose to begin his ministry of total inclusiveness. It was the perfect place for it.

And just so, as a church, as a member of the body of Christ, our calling is to open our door to any and all who are seeking exposure to God's love, and acquaintance with the Gospel, the good news of Christ's redeeming sacrifice. This church is an appointed place, a place set apart for a particular mission, to spread the word and the love of God to the surrounding world. By stepping into the Jordan River that day, Jesus transformed it from a symbol of

separation into a symbol of universality. Let us always open our door in the same spirit.

And finally, let's think for a moment about **what** Christ did on that day, in that place. He let himself be baptized. Matthew tells us that he "came up out of the water", which must mean that he was submerged. Our Lord and Savior, the one who was there with God in the beginning, the one through whom all things were made and in whom all things are maintained in existence, He let Himself be immersed in water. Why was that, of all things, the exact right thing for Him to do then and there?

The answer is because baptism symbolizes death. At the very outset of His ministry, Jesus shows the world that the path He himself is going to take is a path that leads to, and through, death. As Paul puts it in Romans 6: *Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death...* (vv. 3,4)

Immediately after our Lord's baptism, Matthew describes for us the Holy Spirit leading Jesus into the desert to be tempted by Satan. We're all familiar with the three temptations. Each is a temptation to accomplish Christ's mission in some way other than the way he has chosen. The first temptation is to perform the work miraculously, like turning stones into bread. The second temptation to cheat death, and the third temptation is to follow the ways of the world. Christ resists each temptation. There will be no deviation for him, no easy way out. God's way, and therefore Christ's own, is the way of sacrificial love, leading to the ultimate sacrifice.

Christ makes the same point at the end of his ministry in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he prays to his father to take this cup of death from Him if there is any other way, and then concludes, "But your will, not my own, be done."

And so, from the very beginning, Jesus teaches us that, as Christians, death is the gateway to God. That sounds threatening or even morbid, but it's not. It's what we've always believed: death is not the end, it's the beginning. But we don't need to wait until physical death to take the first steps on that journey. Anyone can begin it any time, simply by turning to Christ, and accepting His loving leadership into our lives and his loving spirit into our heart. That's what Christ accomplished on the cross.

The baptism of Christ happened at the perfect time, when the world was ready to receive a message of self-sacrifice as the narrow gate through which

everyone must pass on the road back to God. It happened at the perfect place, where all of humanity was being led to that gate, regardless of race or gender or personal history. And it was the perfect sacrament, to represent for one and all that this is God's way, God's only way, because this is who God is, that God Himself will die of His own love, in order to open that gate for all of us.

And so, Gracious God, our prayer for this morning and for this message is that you open our minds to the realization that every day and every place is the perfect time and the perfect place to seek your companionship and guidance; we ask that you lower the volume of the world and speak to us in ways that we can understand through our friends and our circumstances; we pray for ever-growing spiritual maturity and an expanding sphere of responsibility for our church as it strives to present to our community here in Gaines the same forgiving love Your child and Our Savior offered to the world around Him; and we ask for these things in His name.