

“Why was Jesus baptized?”
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Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

On the green shore of the Jordan River, his feet sinking in the mud, his sleeves still wet and dripping, a man looked up at a crowd of people, eager and waiting. His name was John. All day he had been baptizing people, dipping them in the water and raising them up, declaring repentance and forgiveness. His arms ached from the day’s work. And yet he saw that his work was not done; these people thought him the Messiah. And so, as tired as he was, he lifted his arms and began to speak. He spoke of One who would cleanse and save them, who would baptize them, not just with water, but with fire and Spirit. He would offer more than John ever could, more than a clean slate, more than the forgiveness of the past. He would offer new life; he would give them a future. He would make them children of God.

John told the crowd that he was not worthy to untie the sandals of this man.

Then as the sun is setting, when John thinks his work is done, who should show up but this very man of which he just spoke? Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ. And what’s more, Jesus asks John to baptize him.

Matthew tells us that John protests, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matt. 3:14).

It’s a question we might ask as well. Why would Jesus—the One without sin, the Person into whom God poured all of God’s self and all of God’s love—ask to be baptized?

Perhaps the baptism was simply a convenient way to get that voice from heaven to shout out his identity, to launch Jesus’ ministry and proclaim him the Son of God. Like some heavenly rock concert at the beginning of a presidential campaign. Or perhaps this was the moment when Jesus was anointed king, his baptism a coronation, in the line of David. This was his swearing in, his inauguration day.

Somehow these explanations, however, fall short. I think it’s because they just don’t jive with what we know of this man. They imply that this man who laid down his life for the sake of others—who washed their feet, and kissed their wounds, and even died for them—this man who described himself as a servant, somehow this man was suddenly lifting himself up in a show of power.

What Jesus did in life, and in death, was always for the sake of others. For us. So why would he choose to be baptized?

There's a story that might help us answer that question. A story told by Albert Camus in his novel *The Fall*. It's a story of a successful lawyer in Paris, who prides himself for his generosity and his defense of the vulnerable and oppressed. It's a story, in short, of a man believed by all, including himself, to be good.

On a cold November night, fresh with rain, this good man walks onto a bridge, past a young woman dressed in black, leaning over the railing. After a moment's hesitation, he walks on, saying nothing. He walks on until his body is frozen with the sound of the woman striking the water below. He hears her cry out for help, as she is carried downstream. He wants to run to her, to rip his clothes off and dive into the freezing water. He tells himself to be quick. But he doesn't move. He thinks only of the cold water and how he might drown too. He whispers, "Too late, too far..." Then slowly he walks away, telling no one.

Though he did not know it yet, though his life would continue as usual for some time after, the lawyer would later come to understand that that was the night "when the music stopped and the lights went out." He becomes haunted by that moment—and by the realization that he is not as good as he once believed.

He sees the woman everywhere, hears her cries everywhere. Once on an ocean liner, he sees a dark spot on the sea, and though it but rubbish from the ship, he becomes convinced that it's a person drowning.

He gives up his career, changes his name, moves to a new country, and becomes consumed with guilt. And yet, he admits that he remains unchanged. Still unwilling to help another if it risks harm to himself.

At the very end of his story, the lawyer says that he is not special. Each of us has stood on that bridge and failed to risk our lives. And now each of us speaks the words that have echoed in his ears every night since: "O young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may a second time have the chance of saving us both!"

What the lawyer doesn't know is that even at that moment there is One who is diving into that freezing water to save them both. One who is making the choice he could not. One who is not only the Son of God, but also the Son of Man, a representative into whom not only divinity but humanity is poured, all of it, you and me and every person then and now. One who carries us on his back, leaping into the water we feared.

His name is Jesus, and this is why he was baptized. John's baptism may have given the people a second chance, but as the lawyer admits, even given a second chance, a thousand chances, we would forfeit them all. We need more than a second chance. We need to be saved. We need to feel arms around us, pulling us out of the water.

Because once you feel those arms, once you breathe the air of life again, once you know that you were saved, chosen, despite the cost, you will find the change that so long eluded the lawyer.

Victor Hugo writes, “The greatest happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved; loved for ourselves, or rather, loved in spite of ourselves.” When you know that kind of love, what river would you not be willing to dare?

Jesus wasn’t baptized because *he* had sinned. He was baptized because *we* had sinned. He carried all those sins on his back, into that water, to watch them float away. And away. And away.

Jesus dove into that water, hearing the cry of that woman on that river, hearing the voice of Rachel weeping for her children, hearing Peter deny him thrice, hearing every tear, and every injustice, and every sin, and every choice we made or failed to make. He answers them all. And when he surfaces, there is only one voice left: the voice of God, saying, “You are my child, my beloved.” Saying it to the whole world, through Christ. Only one echo left.

Today, as we commission officers of this church, as we remind them of their baptism, we are not lifting them to positions of power; this is no coronation. This is a continuation of Jesus’ baptism. This is them diving into the river. Not because they alone are so heroic. But because Jesus carries them on his back. They are commissioned today for a life of service, a life laid down for their neighbor.

It is not because they are good, though there is good in them. It is because they are loved, and in that love, there is such happiness that even one’s life can be risked. It is because, so many years ago, a young man stepped into the River Jordan and saved us all. **Amen.**