

New Year, New Me?

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We just got out of the biggest consumer season of the year at Christmas, but advertisers are never done with us. But have you noticed the shift? We went from jewelry, cars, and iphones to gym memberships, diet plans, and Peloton. Marketers often turn to our fears and expectations to get us to buy, buy, buy and the new year is no different. (no offense to any advertisers or marketers out there...but you know it's true...)

Even though the change from December 31st to January 1st is the same as the change of any one day to another, we treat the new year as something special. We irrationally expect things to change just because the year changed. Especially over the last two years, we come with expectation and hope for positive change. We hope beyond hope that this next year can be "normal".

The people lining up at the Jordan river to see John the Baptizer were also filled with expectation of positive change. John's message was of such power that people were wondering if he could be the one- the Messiah- come to save Israel and make things right in the world.

John's response was in the words of 70's rock band Bachman-Turner Overdrive: "B-B-B-Baby you ain't seen nothin' yet!" If you think my words and actions are shocking, just wait!! The new guy is going to cleanse the world of what is evil! He's going to cleanse us with spirit and fire! He's going to be so great, I'm not even worthy to tie his Air Christ sneakers!

I'm sure John's audience was familiar with such enthusiastic and symbolic outbursts from John. After all, John's "interesting" behavior was what drew crowds to him in the first place. But what does all this mean? What kind of person is this "one who is more powerful"? First, John tells us he will separate the wheat and the chaff. This refers to ancient farming techniques that would separate the wheat grain that you wanted to eat, from all the chaff, which is a husk around the grain you can't eat. This imagery is

found in a couple of other parts of the Bible, where it usually refers to good people (the wheat) and the wicked (the chaff). But I would caution us from making that too literal here because I think the message can be deeper than that, which is: Jesus is the lens, the criteria, through which all good and evil should be judged, not just people, but actions, attitudes and hearts.

If you're a child of the 90's like me you remember WWJD bracelets. They stood for What Would Jesus Do? Back in the 90's, a friend of mine was working at a Christian books store where the WWJD bracelets were prominently displayed right by the front register. One evening, he was at the front register when the door opened, a man with a ski mask ran in, grabbed a handful of WWJD bracelets and ran out. When he retold the story, he said I thought two things, first, did I just have a stroke or aneurysm? Secondly, Did that guy just totally miss the point? So let's not miss the point. What do we find in the story of Jesus' baptism that gives us more insight into who Jesus is?

Before diving into these insights, one might ask "why did Jesus need to be baptized? Wasn't he sinless?" This question has provoked discussion even among the Gospel writers, with Matthew offering the added detail that John was reluctant to baptize Jesus, presumably due to his sinlessness. One non-canonical writing of the time said he did it to make Mary happy. Dudes will do anything to not get chewed out or hit with a sandal! The most common explanation I have heard is that he was baptized to be an example that we should be baptized. However, the text we have simply doesn't tell us why. So, let's look at what the text *shows* us about this Jesus being baptized.

First, notice that Jesus comes to be baptized among all the other people who have gathered at the river. He doesn't arrive with any fanfare or special treatment; no limos, no fireworks, no secret service. He takes his place shoulder to shoulder with all the others hurting and in need. This shows the presence of Jesus in our humanity and his solidarity to us in our sufferings as broken humans in need. Jesus entered the world like any other human by being born and stands with us every day as we face

what it means to live as human in a world filled with brokenness. The most common criticism of Jesus in the Gospels isn't that he's too holy, but that he's too close to the common people and sinners. He truly is Emmanuel, "God with us"!

Next, notice that Jesus is a person of prayer. He doesn't approach his experience of Baptism in a merely physical or mentally detached way. He bathes it with prayer, like we witness him do with other major experiences of his life. Jesus also makes prayer a consistent practice of his life, often slipping away from the crowds to rest and pray. Note that in Luke's telling, it is not the moment of baptism that brings the Spirit, but the prayer of Jesus. Jesus shows that prayer is key to living a Spirit-filled life. Do we bathe our acts of worship in prayer? Do we make sure we are open to hearing from God before we walk into our worship services or Bible studies?

Finally, notice that Jesus receives divine affirmation and empowerment. I read an article recently that said the way we speak to our children becomes their inner voice. I can say that is certainly true in my life! I must have been a real klutz of a child, because I was always being told to watch what I was doing. So that is constantly running through my head. So what did Jesus hear from the Father? What became his inner voice? In Luke's account, it appears that only Jesus sees this vision of the Spirit and hears the voice of God. Surely this moment of empowerment and affirmation was something that Jesus frequently reflected on during the difficult times of the next three years of his life leading to the cross. And the readers of Luke's Gospel, including us, have been given the revelation of this vision as well. The vision of the Holy Spirit's descent and the declaration of Jesus as the Beloved Son of God shows the reader of the Gospel that this Jesus, who has been hidden from the public eye for thirty years, has now been revealed as the "powerful one" who is the true Messiah, the bringer of God's kingdom, the presence of God's Son in the world.

Theologian David J. Lose offers that what is shocking about this story isn't that Jesus is baptized like us, but that we are baptized like he is. The baptism of Jesus asks us to remember our own baptism and commitment to our adoption as children of God. I remember my baptism well since it was probably one of the most embarrassing public moments I've ever had. I was baptized at age 10 in a church that did immersion. I was not a good swimmer; growing up the desert will do that to you, and I was anxious about being dunked. Unfortunately when I was leaned back into the water, my feet slipped and I started floating up. Then I got caught up in the white robe that was much too big for me! My friends said it was quite the sight as I struggled and splashed. One deacon even told me, "It looked like the devil in ya didn't want to get dunked."

But I also remember my baptism because I remember that was the time I made my own decision to follow Christ. Whether you were baptized at an older age or as a child who then confirmed that faith at confirmation, you have that moment you can point back to remember starting that journey of following Christ. Since we are called to be like Christ, we are called to be what we see revealed in the life of Jesus, including his baptism. We are called to be people who walk in solidarity with others in our broken world, to serve them with our lives and our presence. Even if it's not something we ourselves strive for or need, we should stand in solidarity with those in need, the least whom others forget. We are called to be people of prayer; people to draw close to God in a consistent life or prayer that invites the Holy Spirit to work through us. We are called to walk in the affirmation and empowerment that we are also beloved children of God, in whom God is well pleased. This understanding of our relationship with God should permeate every aspect of our lives as we follow Christ every day.

So, this year as we consider "a new year, a new me" let's reflect on our decision to follow. Let's not listen to the voices around us that tell us we are not enough; that we have to buy their products to change. Let's listen to the voice of the Spirit that sets us free to be the beloved children of God and may beloved-ness be what drives our change to be more like Jesus. Amen.