

January 12, Baptism of the Lord (Matthew 3:13-17)

Jesus knows he's part of a history, a people's longing and dreams.

by [Mihee Kim-Kort](#) in the [January 1, 2020](#) issue

Shortly after our twins' birth we moved halfway across the country for my husband, Andy, to begin his call as senior pastor to a church in Bloomington, Indiana. A few months after the move we had the twins baptized in his church—a particularly special day, as both sets of grandparents came to be with us. Both grandfathers are, like us, ordained Presbyterian ministers, and each baptized a baby.

The moment my father began to speak, I was startled by the realization that I had never witnessed a baptism in Korean. Even though only a few of us in the congregation could completely understand the words, there was something poignant in the power and beauty of the liturgy spoken in his mother tongue. When I looked around the sanctuary I saw the presence of the body of Christ, even though the congregation that surrounded us was new. I saw the tears on my face reflected on their faces—we all felt the mysterious connection to the larger community of Christ through baptism in that moment.

While baptism represents many things, for some Christians it is first and foremost a reminder that we are God's beloved. This is rooted in Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan, which clearly marks the beginning of his ministry. The story gives us a dramatic glimpse of the inauguration of this new kingdom that Jesus will work to reveal through his teachings and miracles. At the Jordan, Jesus is a new Joshua who will begin his prophetic ministry to Israel and to the world, leading them to the promised land.

The river Jordan is a sacred geographical marker full of rich motifs. This is the same place, not far from Jericho, where the Israelites cross when they enter the land of Canaan and experience God's presence. As the priests carrying the Ark of the

Covenant step into the river, the waters of the Jordan are cut off and the Israelites can cross it on dry ground. Later, the prophet Elijah crosses the Jordan on dry ground with Elisha, just before he is taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. Elisha then returns to Israel in the same way, crossing the Jordan on dry ground to inaugurate his own prophetic ministry. Likewise, Jesus begins his work anointed and ordained, given legitimacy by God's own voice.

But it is necessary to emphasize the moment in terms of the work in front of him. John's baptism of Jesus also demarcates his particular identity as God's son. The synoptic Gospels all record Jesus coming to John the Baptist, a dove descending, and a voice from heaven proclaiming Jesus' belovedness. It isn't only what Jesus is called to do, but what he is called to be—and these are always in intimate relationship together.

The Gospel narratives do diverge. Matthew provides more of an exchange between John and Jesus. John is reluctant to baptize Jesus, exclaiming that he would rather be baptized by him. Jesus answers him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus recognizes that even he is part of a history, a people's longing and dreams. He also recognizes the *kairos* of this encounter. The phrase "in this way" suggests Jesus' need to step into this particular and peculiar moment, this time and space, as a way to perform a bodily declaration of his faith and his trust in God's own faithfulness to the people throughout generations.

This is Jesus' first public act. The performative aspect does not strip away the authenticity and vulnerability of the moment in which Jesus submits to John's authority. Rather, it gives us a glimpse into the transformative power of the embodied speech that becomes a kind of anchoring for all of history. Jesus participates in this acting out, thereby consenting to enter human history in a meaningful way so that his baptism into his work is rooted in the context of the past genealogies and the future ones he gathers around himself. His identity and ministry are made meaningful by the community he forms, joins, and grows with throughout his life on earth. His work is intertwined with the work of humanity.

Jesus' ministry and work were never separated from his identity as God's beloved. But they are fleshed out through his connection to the beloved community. The shared life of Jesus and the beloved disciples has eternal implications; so does their continuous work of recognizing their own humanity as a sign of baptism. All their work is rooted in baptism because each is called out by the voice of love; each is

recognized in their humanity as God's beloved. This is what makes their work for the kingdom possible.

This is the truth and promise that Jesus carries into the wilderness after his baptism and prior to the calling of the first disciples. It's the reminder that we came from somewhere, and we're carried by the hopes and longing of others—and that even this is an expression of our belovedness in God. Our belovedness in God is never separate from the experience of belovedness within the community of Christ. Baptism ties us to the eternal communion of all the saints, something we get a taste of each time we gather at the Lord's table. We were truly made for this life together.