

January 8, Baptism of the Lord A (*Matthew 3:13-17*)

Even Jesus is unable to escape the consequences of sin, becoming a victim of human violence.

by [Michael Rinehart](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue

“Why did Jesus need to be baptized by John? Why did he need to be baptized at all?” she asked me as we shook hands after worship. I love it when worshipers ask thoughtful questions, but there was a long line of people behind her bobbing their heads to see what was taking so long. Was she looking for a one-sentence answer? What was the question behind the question? Why did it matter to her? How I answered would depend upon her assumptions.

“Good question!” I said. She agreed to wait until everyone had gotten through the line.

She is not alone in wondering. According to our reading from Matthew, John is the first to see the irony: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Does baptism in John’s context indicate some kind of hierarchy? Is John making disciples of those he baptizes, becoming their mentor or master? Will my alert worshiper be surprised that I have more questions than answers for her?

We settled into chairs, sipping our coffee. We chatted a bit. She was visiting for the first time, and it can be pastorally useful to identify what sparked such a visit. I came around to the topic. “Why do you ask about Jesus’ baptism?” She thought for a moment, then laid it out. “Well, if Jesus was without sin, and John’s baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, why would Jesus need to be baptized at all?”

She had a point. Clearly she was not new to church. Indeed, John is practicing a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the idea of Jesus’ sinlessness goes all the way back to Paul (2 Cor. 5:21). It didn’t take long for followers of Jesus to develop a high Christology. What did sinlessness mean to Paul, to the unknown author of Hebrews (7:26), and to those who came after them? Was this the conversation my inquisitive worshiper needed? Was she struggling with something

too personal to share? Did something in this passage resonate with her?

I opted for a different approach. I asked, “How do you define sin?” We batted around ideas.

Here in Texas, revival theology floods the airwaves. Sin is typically viewed moralistically and in strictly individualistic terms. How do we help people see sin as having a broken relationship with God and, even more, as a communal problem? Jesus rarely chides individuals for anything, except maybe self-righteousness. Instead, he mourns the sins of the nation. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if only you knew the ways that led to peace” (Luke 19:41–42). “When the Son of Man comes. . . . All the nations will be gathered before him” for judgment (Matt. 25:31–32).

Systems that oppress the poor are baked into our laws and customs. The investment of our retirement funds, the use of our taxes to wage war, and so many other things make any notion of pure righteousness impossible. We are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. In the cross, even Jesus is unable to escape the consequences of sin, becoming a victim of human violence.

John’s baptism is to cleanse the people collectively from their corruption, idolatry, neglect of the poor, and more. In his Matthew commentary, Stanley Hauerwas says John is calling Israel to repentance as a nation. Those who submit to this baptism are saying, “Yes. I’m in. Forgive us our sins, the sins of the nation.” Jesus is all about Israel turning to God, because the kingdom of heaven, where the poor are blessed, is coming. Repent or else all hell will break loose and all calamity will rain down. Indeed it did, in AD 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus, in his baptism, repents on behalf of all Israel.

In any case, Jesus ends up answering the question himself. “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus is in this with us. Together, let us repent. Together, let us fulfill all righteousness.

Before long, our coffee was gone. She seemed satisfied with Jesus’ answer to the question. Apparently, God was too. The voice from heaven proclaims approval. Could she imagine God saying the same to her? I said the words out loud: “You are my beloved daughter, with whom I am well pleased.” The glistening in her eye reminded me why I loved being a pastor.