Out of Place

A Meditation on Matthew 3: 13 – 17

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church January 12, 2020

Jesus and John the baptizer. Cousins. Or second cousins in this case. I think sometimes we forget that they were real people. Did they do the kinds of things that cousins do? My cousin Molly and I took ballet classes together on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons after school. We had sleep overs at each other’s houses. My brother and another of our cousins, Henry, terrified our mothers by building bike ramps in the back yard out of scrap wood and cinder blocks. They routinely tried to break their arms by seeing who could fly the farthest. Henry was also the one who would sit on me and tickle me until I would cry…not the happiest of memories. When we were in high school, I would occasionally have to catch a ride with him. Awkward! I always felt bad for him – he was a year older, ridiculously cool, and I was such a dork. He didn’t seem to mind too much…I guess that’s family.

What about John and Jesus…

Wouldn’t you love to know what happened in all those years in between the two stories we are given? We have the story of their pregnant mothers greeting each other, and of John’s prenatal joy. Then nothing. Not even from the time when Jesus, at age 12, on his trip to the temple in Jerusalem, stayed behind to exchange ideas with the priests. I wonder if John was tempted to stay behind, too, but somehow knew he wouldn’t get off as easily as his cousin. There are some perks to being Jesus. Did they get into trouble together? Did they “borrow” their neighbors’ donkeys and have races down the narrow roads of their village? Did they tease their aunties? Did they drop the Bible times version of water balloons from the roofs of their flat-topped houses? Joseph may have tried to corral them a bit by teaching them both carpentry skills, secretly hoping his nephew would choose a more practical profession than Zachariah’s.

Surely, they spent time together through the years, at least seeing one another in Jerusalem for the festivals. And Jesus must have heard talk of the path John’s life had taken. In his own way, John *had* followed in his father’s footsteps. John, like Zachariah, was in the ministry. While his father was a priest, John was a prophet. Different roles for different men. There is a legend that comes to us from the Infancy Gospel of James. The story that James tells is this: when Herod heard the news from the magi that a new king had been born, he commanded that all male children under the age of two be slaughtered. That we know from Matthew. Here’s James’ addition: when the soldiers found Zachariah and demanded him to bring out his son, he would not tell them where John was. To punish him for his defiance, the soldiers killed Zachariah. If this story is true, then John never knew his father. Not only would he have had to navigate life without a father, but he would also have carried all the complicated emotions of knowing that his father had laid down his life for him. I realized I had never thought about how John would have survived Herod’s decree. If this story is true, then it would have shaped John in extraordinary ways. We can see how John, inspired by a father who stood up to abusive power, would want to make him proud. Could his father’s unbreakable faithfulness have inspired John’s own?

John made his unbounded, radical way in the world. Risky and wild. Distrusting those in authority. Calling out those in leadership roles. Calling on all people to change their ways, to be washed in the baptismal waters and to prepare – because the kingdom of heaven was near. The people must have been hungering and thirsting because they came to him. They came to this man who lived rough. They were drawn to his preaching, to his intensity and passion. But most of all, they hoped his words were true: that one was coming who would baptize them with holy fire!

The people came. The met John in the water, and they washed as if they were getting ready for a party. Imagine the hope building in John as he saw that people really did want to be renewed! John baptized one after another. One by one, he took them into the water and extended God’s welcome. But one day was different than all the others because one day, he looked up to the next person in line and he stopped, dumbstruck. The one who John said was coming was already here. His cousin, Jesus, stood in front of him. And in John’s mind, Jesus looked completely out of place. I love how theologian Scott Hoezee describes this scene:

*Why would Jesus have let himself be so anonymous?  Why did he let himself look like any other mere mortal (and a sinful mortal too)?!  Where was the fire, the axe, the razzle-dazzle John had been hopping up and down screaming about for so long now?  It’s like John had been predicting Sylvester Stallone but instead Mister Rogers showed up.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

John had described the Messiah as one who would carry an axe to cut down the trees that did not produce good fruit. He described him as one with a winnowing fork in his hand so he could separate the wheat kernels from their husks. He expected a lion! But that’s not what John saw standing before him. There was Jesus, looking, well, ordinary. Looking like his cousin. He wasn’t carrying an axe. He wasn’t carrying anything at all! He was just standing there, empty handed, waiting to be baptized, which made as much sense to John as it does to us.

John was calling people to the water so that the metaphorical grit and dirt of their mistakes could be washed from them. Jesus didn’t need it and John didn’t want to offer it to him. Can’t you picture these two cousins, the water of the Jordan flowing around their legs, all the people watching, wondering why John isn’t doing what John is supposed to do!

Hoezee continues, “We, like John, would maybe prefer a Jesus who looks less humble and more proudly powerful; less vulnerable and more self-assuredly victorious.  John the Baptist wanted Jesus to take over the preaching that day, to fill the air with words even more fiery and images even more arresting than John’s own sermons had contained.  But Jesus declined.  Instead he wordlessly waited in the baptism line, wordlessly shuffled into the baptismal waters, and then wordlessly wandered off into the sunset to face God-knows-what in the wilds of the wilderness.  Jesus held back.  He was silent.  He was humble.  He was vulnerable.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

John could not get his head around what was happening. He wasn’t the first to be mystified by Jesus – Mary and Joseph get to make that claim. John wasn’t the first, and he wouldn’t be the last. The disciples, the crowds, the religious leaders, the political leaders. Everyone he encountered – those he healed, those he restored, those he challenged and those who challenged him! All mystified by this man who seemed so out of place, and yet so ordinary. And Jesus continues to baffle, to daze and confuse anyone who seeks to walk in his way. We accept some teachings but can’t get our heads around others. We can’t forgive without setting limits on that forgiveness. We can’t fathom how to love enemies. Our egos get in the way. Our desires get in the way. Our fears impede us.

Like John, we want Jesus to rush in and make it right. *Today.* But that day Jesus said “not yet.” That day was a day for baptism. For sacrament and belonging and community. There would be so many days for Jesus to battle the worlds’ pain and injustice. On that day Jesus needed his extended family, his very imperfect, baptism-soggy family.

Know this: Jesus went into the water because he was one of us. Jesus went into the water so that we would all know that he is in this mess with us. Jesus went into the water as sign and symbol of the relationship God longs to have with us. God walked in a garden with Eve and Adam not out of necessity, but out of desire. Jesus waded in the baptismal waters, not out of necessity, but out of desire. The longing for relationship, the yearning for connection. Jesus went into the water like a parent teaching their child to swim. He went in first, and held out his arms to us, promising that the waters would not hurt us, but would buoy us, save us. He went into the waters so that we could trust him. If we can trust him in the baptismal waters, then we will not have to fear the baptismal fire.

Jesus walked into those baptismal waters because they are the waters of rebirth and God is the one who calls us into life. Out of the womb and into the world. Out of its safety and into this risky life. Up from the waters we rise to receive the breath of God.

Did God’s realm break into the world in the way that John had imagined? Not at all. But I hope, that as John looked into Jesus’ face, the water running down his face and beard, I hope he stared into those fierce, twinkling eyes and saw what he needed to see.

Like John, we live in the tension between what we believe God desires and what we experience on this earth. But we do it together. Together we preach and together we cry and together we labor. Together we go into the waters to be reborn, which will make us all seem out of place – so very out of place - in this crazy world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Scott Hoezee, Center for Excellence in Preaching. <https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/epiphany-1a-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel>. January 6, 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)