

Poor John. It just didn't look right. What was going on? This was not the public appearance of Jesus that John had set everyone up to see and that is narrated in the first 12 verses of today's reading! As Matthew 3 ends, you can almost picture John the Baptist carrying on with the rest of that day's baptisms with a blank look on his face. He said all the familiar words and kept dunking people in the river and all, but his mind was not on his work. Why would Jesus have let himself be so anonymous? Why did he let himself look like any other mere mortal (and a sinful mortal at that)? Where was the fire, the axe, the razzle-dazzle John had been screaming about for so long now? It's like John had been predicting Sylvester Stallone but instead Mister Rogers showed up. *The Surprising Jesus* came to the Jordan to be baptized, of all things!

Jesus' actions no doubt muddled John's mind because they tied into the mind-boggling mystery of the incarnation of God. Jesus was a mere mortal. He really was human. He could blend in with the crowd. Yes, we 21st century readers have the benefit of knowing he is also God's beloved Son, but he's human too—so human as to share our lot in this sinful world. Jesus himself was not sinful but he was squarely identified with a sinful race. So, for our benefit, he let himself get treated as though he was a sinner. It would not be the last time he was so treated, of course. But that's the reason he became human. And it is that very humanness that sets up the opening of the next chapter in Matthew.

Prior to Matthew 4 had you ever heard of the devil tempting God? Of course not. Even the odd scene that opens the Book of Job is not tantamount to temptation. When God is shining in all his mighty splendor, the devil cannot touch him or even get close to God. And even if the devil could get close, he could never tempt God. There would be no sense in trying since there would be zero chance of success. Trying to tempt God to sin would be like thinking you could actually pull a mountain behind you by tying a rope to a tree on the mountainside and giving the whole thing a good tug. Only a fool would think

you could move a mountain by pulling on it, and so also with God and temptation: The devil could never do it. You're never going to move God.

Until Matthew 4. What has happened suddenly to make the devil decide to try to pull the mountain by a rope after all? The Son of God has become human. Suddenly the "mountain" of God has been reduced in size to a significantly more manageable lump of clay, a human. Maybe this one would yield to some serious tugging and pulling. It didn't work, of course. In the end Jesus proved that he was human enough to be tempted, but God enough not to take the bait. At the Jordan River Jesus likewise proved that he was God enough to understand why John was protesting Jesus' request to be baptized but human enough to humbly let John say it anyway. In both cases Jesus cast his lot with us. Jesus looked into the waters of death which baptism represents, he looked into the wilderness of sin and evil which we all eventually face. *The Surprising Jesus* looked to the places of death and sin and evil and said to us, his very human brothers and sisters, "Wait here. I'll go first."

Like John, we would probably prefer a Jesus who looks less humble and more powerful; less vulnerable and more victorious. John the Baptist no doubt 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. 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.

Yet somehow it is maybe Jesus' silence that saves. Before the gospel is finished Jesus will quite famously stand in silence before the likes of Pontius Pilate. Jesus quite consistently seems to know more than he's willing to tell and yet it is somehow precisely his holding back, his willingness to say little or nothing, that manages to make everything work out in the end. Sometimes it's the silence that saves—or at least there is more going on in the relative silence of things than we know. It's not empty silence but pregnant silence.

John protests Jesus' approach to the river with the others who seek John's baptism, saying, "*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*" John is brought to a place of humility because of the humility that Jesus shows. Jesus comes to him from Galilee in order to be baptized even though John's baptism is about repentance—something Jesus has no need of. And yet, it is God's will. Jesus says, "*Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.*" And so, John consents. By partnering with humanity in the baptism of repentance, Jesus shows how deep his commitment to us really is. Our own humility is born of this gift, a gracious gift from *The Surprising Jesus*.

In point of fact, Jesus's words in verse 15, spoken with firmness and humility, are the very first that he says in the gospel of Matthew. Then, Matthew 3:16 makes it appear that Jesus alone saw the dove come down upon him and heard the voice from heaven identifying his beloved Son. We may assume that John at least saw the dove and heard the voice, and we usually think that the crowds saw the dove and heard the voice, too. In truth, all four gospel accounts indicate that *at most* John the Baptist saw the dove but none of the account indicates that anyone else saw or heard anything. Was this all just for Jesus' benefit? And if so, why? It's a question I have been pondering this week.

It is fully possible, based on Matthew's account at least, that Jesus' baptism was one of dozens that long ago day at the Jordan River. It's fully possible that few if any noticed anything unusual about the particular baptism of this particular man. But isn't that how we view all the baptisms we witness? The parents bring the baby to the baptismal font or an adult will step forward, and in any given congregation, we've seen this sight scores of times before. We don't expect anything unusual to happen, and to our watching eyes and listening ears, nothing does happen, either—nothing beyond what we expected anyway.

Yet in the silence of the sacrament and even in its ordinary exercise, the triune fullness of God is present. The heavens are opened again so that we can get closer to God and God can get closer to us. The Spirit of peace and wholeness

descends to make a little one holy. And the Father's voice issues a decree of divine adoption into his family. At church we don't typically see much razzle-dazzle, glitz, or power as the world reckons things. Stones don't turn to bread nor do angels flutter above our heads. But that hardly means nothing is going on! In our times of worship, it is a privilege to open our eyes and ears to see and to hear what is actually taking place. *The Surprising Jesus* is in our midst.

One of the finer films of the last forty years is Bruce Beresford's *Tender Mercies*. The film chronicles the story of Mac Sledge (played by Robert Duvall), a one-time country-western singing star whose life later dissolved into a fog of alcohol and shiftlessness. Divorced from his wife and estranged from his only daughter, Mac staggers through life until one night he collapses onto the porch of a small, lonely little motel and gas station out in the middle of nowhere on the Texas prairie. The motel is run by Rosa Lee, a young widow who is raising her boy, Sonny, and trying to make ends meet.

Even though Mac is a shipwreck of a human being, grizzled, drunk, and despairing, Rosa Lee takes him in, sets him to work for her, and through this, transformation comes to Mac's life. Over time he kicks his drinking habit, becomes a kind of father figure to young Sonny, marries Rosa Lee, and begins to attend the Baptist church in which Rosa Lee is a member of the choir.

In one lovely scene, both Mac and Sonny are baptized one Sunday morning. After the pastor dunks him into the waters of baptism, Mac stands up, blinking and drenched, water dripping off his balding head and glistening on his grizzled beard. It's a portrait of grace. But after the service, Sonny and Mac are sitting outside the motel and Sonny says, "Well, we done it. We got baptized." "Yup, we sure did," Mac replies. "You feel any different?" the lad asks. Chuckling, Mac says, "I can't say I do, not really."

But any movie watcher knows the truth: **Mac is different.** Deep down on the inside of his heart and soul, Mac is a changed man. Outwardly it's true that baptism doesn't seem to change much, and it surely doesn't make life any

easier. In the course of the film Mac manages to have a kind of reconciliation with his estranged daughter, now in her mid-20s. But no sooner does this good thing happen but the daughter is killed in a terrible car wreck. Near the end of the film, still grieving, Mac stands in the middle of a vegetable garden and tells Rosa Lee that he doesn't understand life. He can't understand the *tender mercies* of God that led him to Rosa Lee and to the transformation that his life so badly needed. But then, he can't understand why his daughter had to die, either. We often hear people pondering why bad things happen in life, but Mac is honest enough to admit to being equally perplexed by the good things.

Grace can be as surprising as tragedy.

Mostly, though, grace and tragedy, the good and the bad, co-exist in this life. Yet as Christians journeying through this world, we say that the one thing that makes the difference for us is the one thing that, by all outward appearances at least seems like it could not possibly make any difference: Our baptism. Baptism is a watery sacrament. It is literally water, of course. But very few people would regard it as watery in the more metaphorical sense of being thin and colorless. In a world so full of problems and tragedies, evil and dread, how could baptism make so much as a dent?

But it does. Even Jesus' surprising baptism didn't look like much. John the Baptist himself seems to have been a little disappointed. But anyone who is baptized knows the truth: **It does make a difference.**

And we know for sure that in 2023 Jesus will continue to surprise us. Amen.