

Matthew 3:13-17      The Blessed Voice  
Isaiah 42:1-9  
January 11, 2026

I have only vague memories of my Sunday School days. Every week my family arrived at church not only for worship, but bible study. Although the teachers changed over the years, for the most part it was the same five or six, a boys only class, that shared that part of my life all the way from preschool through high school. There was, of course, a larger department that included the girls, and people of different grades. Much of the general knowledge about the bible's content that I can claim, came from that experience.

There were sword drills and bible memory activities. There were arts and crafts, and music (they at least tried to get us to sing). Most of all what I remember is the stories themselves. Moses in the basket on the Nile, Noah's Ark, Daniel in the Lion's den. The stories about Jesus stand out most in my memory.

There are the encounters with the disciples and people who were sick and adversaries like the Pharisees and Sadducees; there were scenes in boats on the lake and in people's homes, or out on the countryside or wilderness, or at the Temple in Jerusalem at festival times, or at weekly Synagogue meetings.

There were teachings and parables, healings and other miracles, all presented one story at a time, in little snippets, (making one big story). Some of the

lessons were repeated over the long years of childhood and adolescence until in some general way I just knew them, and for the most part, where in the bible to find them.

It is hard to describe how much they have enriched my life, and prepared me for my education and ministry; or what life might be like without them as a reservoir of memory, a foundation for living, or as a resource for interpreting the meaning of life.

One of the emphases of the Church calendar is Epiphany season, is the appearance of Jesus as he began his public career, or ministry. It began as a part of the movement led by John the Baptist near the Jordan River. The event that marks that appearance is the baptism of Jesus by John in the river. That is today's story.

Other than the childhood visit to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve, which itself is one of the old Sunday School stories, nothing is known specifically about the childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood of Jesus.

The only general knowledge is that he was raised in Nazareth in Galilee among a Jewish family and community, and that he was trained in the vocation of Joseph, who was a wood craftsman. We use the word, "carpenter," to name it.

But the baptism marks off a *new* vocation. In Matthew's version of things, he moves quickly from

the baptism to the temptations at the hands of the devil in the wilderness, and then, about the time John was imprisoned, he returned to a town called Capernaum on the northern end of the lake that is called, "the Sea of Galilee." There he began to preach, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."

Next, Jesus begins to choose disciples and then, before the Sermon on the Mount in the fifth chapter of Matthew, we are given the following summary of the work of Jesus after the baptism;

"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him."

The focus of this day is solely on the baptism. After Jesus talked John into baptizing him in the first place, we are given this brief description;

"As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'"

Thus begins the story that leads to the cross and the empty tomb.

The meaning of baptism in the Bible is varied. The baptism of John was centered in the idea of the Forgiveness of Sin. It was a ritual bath, signifying the cleansing of the inner life; a bath for the soul. In the early Christian setting baptism came also to be associated with the crucifixion and resurrection.

It signifies participation in the death of Christ, putting off the old nature, putting on the new, dying to self, and being raised to new life in Christ, living towards God. It was tied to the idea that something new was about to happen, therefore preparation, in the form of repentance, was in order.

A question is raised, why would the Messiah be baptized by John, who is presented as subordinate, or why be baptized for the forgiveness of sins if he is sinless, or to participate in his own death and resurrection? In this case John objects and Jesus actually has to talk him into it. His main strategy is simple, to assure John that it is all done in obedience to God, to fulfill all righteousness.

It has been suggested that Jesus obeyed and was baptized in order to set a good example for the rest of us, and to identify with the human predicament. Baptism also signifies the promised new life. That is the point of the story. That is the point of all those wonderful Sunday School stories.

The voice from heaven did not go in the direction of inner cleansing or death and resurrection, but divine pleasure with Jesus, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.”

When we participate in the religious life of the church; worship services, ritual and song, the study of scripture and prayer, community service, we are not seeking to meet a requirement, but making faith and love a habit, relating to behavior that can be experienced, because discipline and restraint are like practice to a musician or an athlete.

Religious actions and thoughts create good habits, good memory, like of all those Sunday School classes. This aspect of our lives together *can* be overplayed. But *it can also* be underplayed. Perhaps that is the general trend of our times.

There are plenty of criticisms in the bible, from prophets like Amos, to the criticisms of Jesus against the pharisees, to the way Paul greets the readers of his letter to the church in Galatia. And yet, what has been given to the church is still essentially a religion.

A religion that insists in its own method of hearing the divine voice is arrogant, distorted and corrupted. It becomes transactional which is another way of saying that it is legalistic, a works-based religion. But that is not what has happened with Jesus.

In the story for the day, Jesus hears a voice as he is coming up out of the water. The voice does not

explain to him the meaning of the ritual, it affirms him as beloved. It is a blessed voice.

Let me put it another way.

When practiced faithfully, however, without a concern for perfection or judgment of others who do things differently, the doctrines and rituals, songs and prayers, offerings and deeds of service, *can create the context in which we too can hear the blessed voice.* There are no guarantees, but there are better likelihoods. For the problem we face is not that God hasn't spoken, but that *we haven't heard.*

He hears the voice while participating in a ritual that one could make a strong case is unnecessary for him. Religion at its best helps us to see and hear the *blessed* voice, to experience the encounter with God's love for us that has been given in Christ Jesus. It turns out that a healthy religious life is in fact somehow connected to a healthy life generally, not necessarily, but gratuitously.

. . . to see, each in our own way, the heavens opened, and to hear the blessed voice that brings the assurance that we have been loved and forgiven and cleansed; that we have been caught up in the death of Christ, died to ourselves and to our world, and been caught up in the life of Christ as well, so that we may, live towards God, which is the only meaningful way to live, and the most joyous, and hopeful life possible.

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