

The Epiphany text this year is, as is traditional, the story of Jesus' baptism. But this time we have extensive foregrounding, in Luke's presentation of John the Baptist's ministry preceding Jesus' baptism. In fact, the way Luke tells it, John may have already gotten himself thrown into prison by the time Jesus was baptized, in which case he was baptized by someone else in John's movement. It doesn't matter; in this story the emphasis is on John the Baptist and his message.

Luke carefully places the story in the context of the authorities—the emperor, the governor of Judea and the ruler of Galilee, the high priests at the Jerusalem Temple. It's not the year of the drought, or the year a tower fell on a bunch of people, or the year when the price of fish bottomed out; it's the year we remember because of who was in power. Without knowing specifics about those authorities, we can gather that they are relevant to the fact that it was a time of high anxiety for ordinary people, because when the word of the Lord came to John in the wilderness, and he went out to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, *crowds* came out to be baptized by him. All was not well, and people were looking for antidotes to generalized anxiety. We're talking about all kinds of people, too: ordinary Judeans, one supposes, but also tax collectors and soldiers—people who you wouldn't expect to have much time for an old-fashioned prophet, a second incarnation of Isaiah. Indeed, when the soldiers ask John what they should do, they are opening themselves up to hear an answer that might be contrary to their oath of loyalty to the emperor. It's extraordinary that they even ask. They must have been extremely discombobulated.

John's message is not reassuring, exactly. He calls his listeners the offspring

of snakes and tells them that there is wrath on the way. Then he challenges their Abrahamic privilege, as it were, saying that God could raise up children to Abraham from the stones on the ground, so being Jews is not going to exempt them from what's coming. It all feels very contemporary to me, this generalized sense of doom.

So the crowds ask John, "What should we do," and his answers are actually surprisingly moderate. If you have extra clothing or food you should share with those who are short. Tax collectors should refrain from defrauding people. Soldiers should refrain from threatening or extorting people. It's not a high bar. But if that's all that John thinks people need to do to "bear fruits worthy of repentance," it suggests that something has been preventing them from behaving with ordinary decency. And that something, I'm willing to bet, is fear. Why do we refuse to share our extra with those in need? Because we're afraid we'll be caught short later. Why do people use their status or power to abuse others? Because even with their advantages, they're afraid they won't be equal to the threats out there. These people are possessed by fear and anxiety. They have no clear idea what they can do, what they have power to do. All they had to cling to was their Abrahamic privilege, and now John's taken that away too.

That's the context for Jesus' baptism. These crowds of fallen, broken, bewildered people, failures at common decency, grasping at straws that they don't deserve—that's who Jesus joins when he comes to be baptized. Wading into the waters with them, he takes his place among us. Luke doesn't give us any description of Jesus' baptism, just *that* he was baptized, in the same sentence in which "all the people were baptized." And upon that gesture of solidarity with the sinners, God's

Spirit rests on him and God's voice says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The Epiphany—the revelation, the discovery—is that Jesus' divine Sonship becomes official when he decides to hang out with wretched viper spawn.

Identity is a tricky thing. The *Washington Post* reported in December that president-elect Trump is picking his cabinet members partly on the basis of how they look—literally, their physical appearance.¹ "That's the language he speaks. He's very aesthetic," said one person familiar with the transition team's internal deliberations who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "You can come with somebody who is very much qualified for the job, but if they don't look the part, they're not going anywhere." He's a show-business guy, and to him, appearance is identity. John, on the other hand, rejects appearances and even lineage, accusing the Judeans of relying on their Jewishness to guarantee that God will protect them. He says that they're actually snakes. John ties identity to behavior.

Jesus approaches identity a third way. He identifies *with* the confused and faulty people on the banks of the Jordan by participating in the baptism for which they've also come, but then instead of becoming confused and faulty as they are, he becomes the Son of God. You might say that by going low, he goes high—but I'm not sure that's helpful. What I mean to say is that Jesus accepts the identity that God gives him, exalted *because* humbled. Empowered *because* surrendered. Divine *because* human. Jesus' ministry is powered by the Holy Spirit, which he receives by

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/donald-trump-is-holding-a-government-casting-call-hes-seeking-the-look/2016/12/21/703ae8a4-c795-11e6-bf4b-2c064d32a4bf_story.html?utm_term=.3591ae89e142

joining the crowd.

Let me back up with a great story I read about a Bible translator long ago in Papua New Guinea.² He had gotten to the part in Luke about Jesus' genealogy, which we never read because it's so boring. He read it to his local helper, to see if he was getting the language correct, and was surprised to see the helper straightening up and alertly paying attention. In fact, the helper told him that they would hold an important meeting that night so that the people could hear this part.

When evening time came the appointed house was completely full of people. The missionary had never seen so many people attend a Bible reading event before. The language helper asked the missionary to read his translation for the day. The missionary began to read name after name after name. As he read he realized that something strange was happening. The crowd of tribespeople was crisply attentive. They closed in upon him as he read. He was actually afraid they might crush him. He was afraid that what he was reading must have offended some ritual taboo about which he knew nothing. Perhaps they were angry with him. And he had no way to escape. He forced himself to keep on reading the names.

When the missionary translator had finished reading one of the men said to him: "Why didn't you tell us all this before? No one bothers to write down the ancestors of spirit beings. It is only real people who keep track of their genealogy." "Jesus must be a real person!" another voice cried in astonishment. "His genealogy is longer than ours!" cried out another. Still another said, "Jesus must have been a real man on this earth. He's not just white man's magic!"

What the missionary translator took to be a boring and meaningless list convinced these people that the truth of scriptures could no longer be in doubt. Jesus must be a real person! A real person and the Son of God!

The genealogy is what helped this Papua New Guinean audience "get" that Jesus lived in the real world and was concerned with real human situations. The gift of the Holy Spirit at his baptism is what powered his public life and made him able.

Our baptisms echo his: we also receive the Holy Spirit and are made able. Our

² http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-c/epiphany1c_1995_ser/

identity is as children of God and members of the priesthood of all the faithful.

The things that make us anxious and fearful are, God knows, real. But they are not more real than the Holy Spirit of God. Jesus showed up to where the hurting people were, and his powerful ministry began. The Holy Spirit gives us what we need for our ministries as well.

Let us pray: Creator, water pourer, hear our prayer for the world that we may find ourselves with you in the swirling dust of people's lives, living in the light brought through love and proclaiming justice. Hear us as we pray for those coping with disaster long after we've forgotten about it.

For those coping with a sharper, more uncertain world in fear of itself and each other, in religion and politics. Water pourer, hear our prayer for the world that we may find ourselves, with you, in the swirling dust of people's lives, living in the light in Jesus' name. Amen.