

Introductory

This text has parallels in Mark (1: 9-11) and Luke (3: 21-22). John A (1: 29-34) talks about how John B talks about how he baptized Jesus, but he has no actual account of the actual baptism. The TLH one-year lectionary does not appoint any of those texts to be read on any Sunday. This is the appointed Gospel reading for Epiphany 1A in both the LW and LSB three-year lectionary.

That's another of many reasons to use the three-year lectionary. There are many important pericopes in the three-year series that are not common or not appointed at all on Sundays in the one-year series. Those blanks would have been filled in during the week when daily church services were widely done, but weekday church services these days are few and far between.

Some of the churches around here do Saturday night or other weeknight services, but those are billed and seen as a substitute for Sunday morning Divine Service. It's problematic when the church starts scheduling worship of God around peoples' schedules, and the reason why most people go on Saturday night is, so they don't have to get up on Sunday morning and go to church.

And a lot of times, you end up with two or even three weekly services in a building not even half full, and there seems to be some badge of honor in having multiple services, and to take away one of the services is seen as a tacit admission of defeat, especially in a congregation with declining attendance, which are the ones who ought to be combining services, of which there are many.

That's the primary reason for using the three-year lectionary rather than the one-year; you just get more Bible in, and you cover a lot that is not covered in the lectionary that has three times as many readings as the other. I would think that pastors who lament "oh, it's Pentecost again, didn't we just do Pentecost, I told them all there is to know last Pentecost," would love the three-year series.

When that pastor is lamenting that, I'm hearing "I looked at that text once, and I'm too lazy – he would call it 'busy' – to look at it again, and to look at it in-depth would be hard work, and I have forgotten most of my Greek, and I guess I'll just go to the file," and he does. And then he wonders why people look bored as he reads a sermon that bores even him, and all have heard it before.

Some of the one-year lectionary crowd are critical of "liberals" who mess with the accepted liturgical usage of our church body, but then refuse to use the lectionary used by the vast majority

of our congregations, the one whose use we have collectively decided to use. Some of them will not stop there, but they will in a most vicious manner attack the Church's choice of lectionary.

When somebody calls the three-year lectionary "the Pope's lectionary" – I'm quoting an actual person – you have to wonder how well they've thought that through. Most of what we do in Divine Service could be called "the Pope's," the notable exception being the Nunc, which is a Lutheran addition. You could say the same thing for most of the days on the Church Calendar, and the like.

The other reason is that I have heard of at least one LCMS pastor say that using the three-year lectionary is wrong, which means that the issue is no longer a matter of adiaphora, which means that I *have to* use the three-year lectionary, and so do you. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the origins of the one-year lectionary hysteria seems to be the Ft. Wayne Seminary, my Alma Mater.

Matthew (3:1) tells us that John the Baptizer is working "in the wilderness of Judaea" and he further relates (3:6) that people were being baptized by John "in the River Jordan." John the Apostle is more specific in his Gospel, placing the location of John and his work at "Bethany beyond the Jordan" (1:28). That Bethany is currently a tourist attraction; maybe we'll go there.

The Bethany here is not to be confused with the more common Bethany, the one that is today a suburb of the city of Jerusalem. This Bethany is in modern-day Jordan, just across the river border on the east side of the Jordan. John the Apostle uses those words "beyond the Jordan" to distinguish between the two and to clarify the exact location, and Google maps knows of it.

Nestle-Aland shows a variant reading in John (1:28) that has the name as "Bethbara," or "house of the ford." It was the term found in the Textus Receptus, and it is therefore found in KJV. I agree with those who think Bethbara, and this Bethany are the same place, on TripAdvisor currently #3 of 14 things to see in Madaba. The trip to Israel is pending, based upon the current administration

Textual Notes

13. Far from wandering about with no particular purpose, Jesus goes "ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰορδάνην πρὸς τὸν Ἰωάννην τοῦ βαπτισθῆναι ὑπ' αὐτοῦ - from Galilee to the Jordan to John the Baptizer, to be baptized by him." We have no record of Him between the ages of twelve and now – about thirty. That's a very large gap, but not an uncommon one, as far as biographies go.

The Gospels are inspired biography of Jesus, and like all other biographies the inspired author focuses more on the more important and less on the less important. Not all things in the life of anybody are equally important. Choose your biography, and you can bet that the author will not likely spend very little time on the childhood of the famous person because it's not important.

The inspired writers of biography of Jesus – the Gospels – seem to think that Holy Week was pretty important. All of them spend a very disproportionate amount of ink on those eight days, more even than on the circumstances surrounding His birth, which Mark skips altogether. During those skipped years we can properly conclude that not much important or noteworthy happened.

We know the events leading up to His birth, we know about the birth itself and the things that happened at the time of that birth. We know about Herod and the Magi, and we know about the trip to Egypt and back. We know about the Temple incident when He was twelve, and we know about all of those things because they are recorded in the Bible. The skipped years are not.

People want to know why we don't know more about Jesus, the lost years, but we know more about Jesus prior to age thirty than we do about most people of that time and place. About whom do we know more about during those years of that time and place than Jesus? Even now, what do we really know about the early lives of people like Abe Lincoln or Mickey Mantle, et al?

It's because it doesn't matter what you did while you were growing up. It's because nobody – except for Kate and Ashley and Melissa Gilbert and the like – does anything noteworthy or even important while they are growing up. It's because we are all takers during those years, and none of us start being givers until we become adults, when we may even begin to be noteworthy.

And at about the age of thirty, and we are not told why that timing, but we are told that Jesus came “in the fullness of time,” Jesus deliberately left Nazareth, His hometown, and purposefully made His way to the place where John B was Baptizing. Jesus knew His Bible well, and He knew His Person, and He knew about the OT words speaking of the “voice crying in the wilderness.”

Specifically, Jesus went for the purpose of being baptized by John. Why now? Firstly and obviously, Jesus is the one who controlled the timing; when He went to John. Likely just like everybody and his brother, Jesus had heard about the work of, and John sounded a lot like that “voice crying in the wilderness,” and knowing Himself to be Messiah, He made His way to him.

Secondly obviously, John is the one who controlled the timing; when John went and began to do what he did, that set into motion the coming of Jesus to him, to be baptized by Him, and so it began. Perhaps the more pertinent question is why it took John so long to begin his life's work. In a time when male adult life expectancy was ca. forty; did he think he was running out of time?

How do you know that? How do you know average life expectancy in the time and place of Jesus? Well, it's not like the age of the earth; there you just make things up, like Carl Sagan used to. You dig up bones. Baby bones are smaller than toddler bones, and bones grow until you reach adulthood, then bones begin to age, and somewhere in 90s they all go all to pot – generally.

John knew what he knew, and he knew it from early on; while still inside his mother, he leaped “for joy” at the presence of Jesus. Presuming John knew – or at least knew of – Jesus, it must have

become to him increasingly clear over time, as Jesus grew into manhood, that Jesus was different from the rest. Most noteworthy – it would have been obvious – He never sinned, not once.

Jesus never sinned in deed, or in word, or even in His thoughts, and of whom else can that be said? Knowing what he knew, why did John not begin to do what he did before the ripe old age of thirty? We see from his later imprisonment that John had his doubts, and in the years leading up to him beginning to do what he did, he could probably discern how this thing was going to play out.

Any prophet of God knows that he will face opposition. It's a simple matter of having to say things that people don't want to hear, and John would not be the first prophet who would do that and for that be killed, nor would he be the last. I think that Jesus was a likeable guy, and John knew that his beginning to do what he did would lead to where it did for Jesus, and it did.

The text also indicates that Jesus goes there because He knows what's up; that He must be Baptized by John. The two men were related by blood, and John had leaped for joy in his mother's womb when Elizabeth met the pregnant Mary. Almost certainly the two knew about the other, and in all likelihood, they had met, and you wonder if when they talked, they ever talked theology.

14. Jesus comes to John to be baptized by Him, “ὁ δὲ διεκώλυεν αὐτὸν – but he prevented Him.” The verb is the imperfect active indicative form of “διακωλύω,” a hapax logomena (it occurs one time) in the NT. Generally, when we want to more clearly see the meaning of a word, we use the concordance, which lists all the occurrences of that word in the NT. For this word, there are none.

Or we click the mouse twice if we're on biblehub.com. But the problem with the hapax is that when you click, nothing comes up, and if you're looking in the paper concordance, this is the only verse where that word occurs. So, we look at how the word is used in extra-biblical sources in that time and place, one click of the mouse, or look the word up in a lexicon (like a dictionary.)

According to those sources, the word indicates serious business, including things like justice being done, injustice being prevented, and the use of force to do those things. John really, really did not like the idea of him baptizing Jesus. It just wasn't right, and that's all there is to it. By refusing to baptize Jesus, John was – in his thinking – passively preventing a wrong thing from being done.

John says to Jesus what most of us would say to Jesus in that situation, “Εγὼ χρειάν ἔχω ὑπὸ σοῦ βαπτισθῆναι, καὶ σὺ ἔρχῃ πρὸς με – I have need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?” In American, the pronouns “I” and “you” are needed to understand the meaning of the sentence. If one of us were saying that sentence, we would verbally emphasize the words “I” and “you.”

If we were writing that sentence, we might italicize “you” and “I” for the same effect. Since it is an inflected language, the pronouns are not needed here in the original Greek. But the holy author places them there, and you do that to emphasize the “I” and the “you.” John knew him, and John knew Him, and the idea that he should baptize Him seemed to him like it was opposite day.

15. The response of Jesus to John's refusal indicates that He is well aware of John's objection and the reason for it. He tells John what to do, and then He tells John why he needs to do what He tells him to do, saying to John "Ἀφεξ ἄρτι· οὕτως γὰρ πρέπον ἐστὶν ἡμῖν πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην – Let it go now, because it is fitting for us to fulfill all justice," and just what does that mean?

The verb – which often means "forgive" – is an aorist imperative, Jesus commanding John to do something that he has not yet done. Sometimes the imperative can be a request, but that's not the case here; in fact, Jesus puts a time frame on His command; do it now! This is the parent saying to the child to do it and do it "right now!" or Jack Bauer telling Chloe to send it to his phone, now!

The verb "πρέπω – to be fitting" is a hapax in the Gospels, but it occurs six other times in the epistles, where it is used of things that seem to be self-evident and should not need a whole lot of explaining. In the thinking of Jesus, it is self-evident that He should be baptized by John, giving as the reason "to fulfill all righteousness" or "justice," and just what does He mean by that?

The word "fulfill" is common in the NT and has several nuances. In this context, it is used in the sense of completing or fulfilling an obligation, in this case the obligation to engage in a myriad of "washings" common among the Jews of the day. Barclay is mostly correct when he says,

The Jews knew and used baptism, but only for proselytes who came into Judaism from some other faith. It was natural that the sin-stained, polluted proselyte should be baptized, but no Jew had ever conceived that he, a member of the chosen people, a son of Abraham, assured of God's salvation, could ever need baptism. Baptism was for sinners, and no Jew ever conceived of himself as a sinner shut out from God.

Proselyte baptism was what he says it was, but that doesn't mean the Jews were unaware of the concept of ritual "washing" – the basic meaning of the Greek "baptism" here. Far from having an aversion to water, they were constantly washing themselves, various body parts, and other things. The OT roots of washing had, by the time of Jesus, grown into a large, multi-branched tree.

The WIK article is very thorough on this point. Some washings were done with words in accompaniment, and others were not. The touching of such diverse objects as your own private parts and dead bodies were cause for washing. Mealtime and trips to the bathroom were among other occasions for washing, and then there was ritual washing with religious symbolism.

Jesus talks about this later and often, mostly with the Pharisees, clearly indicating that He has little use for their laundry list of occasions to wash. When He talks here about being washed "to fulfill all righteousness," He is declaring that He will be washed one time, and one time only, and that will suffice for all the washings He will be skipping – and for which He will be criticized.

More familiarly, we here we see Jesus for the first time placing Himself in place with the sinners, and He does so very deliberately. He will continue that practice during His Ministry, often being criticized for being around and socializing with them sinners. His response can be summarized in His declaring that it is the sick people who are in need of the doctor, not those who are well.

On the cross, He takes the place of sinners, He is identified as The Sinner, cursed as such, the recipient of the righteous wrath of the Father, as “He who knew no sin” was being made sin, that we might become “the righteousness of God. If you don’t understand the Vicarious Atonement (sometimes called The Great Exchange), then you won’t understand why Jesus has to be baptized.

On a very basic level, by insisting on being baptized, Jesus is indeed identifying Himself with the sinners, as has been noted by others. It is indeed an identity that will take on its fullest meaning on the cross. Noteworthy here is that, unlike the rest of the baptized, He’s not confessing His sins – He has nothing to confess – but then neither were the religious leaders, who had plenty to confess.

But there’s more to it than that, as we see by comparing the life of Jesus before His Baptism with His life after it; before this, He hadn’t done anything that any of the Evangelists found worthy of recording. The one exception is that He was teaching the teachers in the Temple, something that was noteworthy and duly noted by Luke, but only by Luke. Then John went and baptized Jesus.

That got the ball rolling. Immediately after His Baptism, the Holy Spirit led Him out into the wilderness specifically to be tempted by Satan. It was the beginning of the knock-down, drag-out fight that would be His ministry for three years, culminating in the Cross, the place where He would indeed “fulfill all righteousness” by paying for the sins of all people of all times and places.

16. After John baptized Him, “δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εὐθὺς ἀνέβη ἀπὸ τοῦ ὕδατος – Jesus came up out of the water.” KJV and others include the word “immediately” or something like that, but a lot of the translations – to their credit – leave it out, and it should be left out. Here it simply means that one thing (Baptism) happened, and then another thing (rising out of the water) happened.

If you ask Google Images, it will tell you that almost all modern art that depicts it depicts the Baptism of Jesus with an abundance of water, often running, and using the mode of immersion. Most people think that Jesus was baptized like that. Google Images will further tell you that Medieval and Renaissance art depicts sprinkling as the mode used. Well spotted, Google Images!

The 1515 Baptism of Christ by Joachim Patinir, for example, has Jesus kneeling in shallow backwaters while water is poured over His head. If you look at a photo of the place where Jesus is supposed to have been baptized, the water is quite shallow. It looks like a person would have to go horizontal to be immersed in those waters. Maybe the water was deeper then. Hard to say.

The argument that He comes “up out of the water” indicates immersion may well be an exegetical red herring. The same phrase is used by Luke in Acts (8:39) to describe what the Ethiopian Eunuch

did right after he was baptized by Phillip. That act took place in the modern-day Gaza Strip, where it was very unlikely there would have been enough water to immerse the eunuch or anybody else.

Luke is quite fond of idiom, and to come “up out of the water” may well be Luke’s idiom for what a person does after he has been baptized. Having said that, the Lutherans have never said that you can’t immerse to baptize, and Luther is alleged to have said that immersion is actually preferred, on account of what Paul says to the Romans today, and you know that ‘cold churches” theory.

The fact that the Greek language – like the American language – has a lot of more specific words for various modes of washing, and the sacred authors all choose the very general word “baptize – to wash” indicates that mode is not important, and it isn’t. It didn’t become an issue until Reformation times, when the Anabaptists (Baptists) made a new law, insisting on immersion.

Jesus was baptized, and then something very unusual happened; “καὶ ἰδοὺ ἡνεόχθησαν οἱ οὐρανοί, καὶ εἶδεν Πνεῦμα Θεοῦ καταβαῖνον ὥσει περιστερὰν ἐρχόμενον ἐπ’ αὐτόν·- Look! The heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and landing on Him.” Jesus saw this, and John A tells us (1:32) that John B also saw it, and it would have been seen by all.

17. Some audio to go with the video; “ἰδοὺ φωνὴ ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν λέγουσα Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ Υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα – Behold! A voice from the heavens saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’” Even as He is identifying with the sinners, the visual and the audio are telling an entirely different story. Far from being actual sinner, He is the Son of God.

A few closing thoughts on “to fulfill all justice.” Of His own volition, Jesus left Nazareth and went to where John was for the express purpose of being baptized by John for this reason; “to fulfill all righteousness.” John baptized Jesus, the dove and the voice of the Father identified Jesus for whom He is, and right after that He was “led up to the wilderness to be tempted by Satan.”

The wilderness temptation of Jesus by Satan is the first recorded confrontation between those two, and that confrontation would continue – often through means of demons and people – throughout His Ministry, even to the cross, where the temptation took the form of “if” et al, and where Jesus would die that perfect, sacrificial death for this purpose; to satisfy the Justice of the Father.

In preaching this text, I will probably talk about Christian Baptism and about how at Baptism, the Christian (or the Christian parents) puts a target on his back; before Baptism, where you were publicly identified to be a Christian, Satan had no interest in you. After Baptism, Satan is consumed with the best way to get you over to his side, and he works on that job 24/7.

I guess it's one of the arguments used by people who refuse to baptize infants until the parents of that infant do things – start coming to church is the most common requirement. They say that you baptize that infant, you put up the red flag for Satan to start working on that new Christian. Not being in Divine Service, that infant is not being equipped for the fight, and neither are his parents.

Then they proceed to give multiple other reasons why they refuse Baptism in those situations, and I have found it to be an almost absolute law that when somebody gives me a lot of reasons, and none of those reasons make sense, then you're probably not telling me the one real reason why.

Hymns

Sing hymns from the Epiphany section, including those about the Baptism of Jesus

Sermon Titles

Target on the Back

Getting the Ball Rolling

Doing Something

Who Should Baptize Whom?

Do It Now!

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa