

Out of the Ordinary: A Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany

The Baptism of the Lord

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He must have been something to behold—old John the Baptist—eyes wild and penetrating, hair and beard shaggy and unkempt. He was dressed in a long, coarse camel hair shirt, pulled in at the middle by a crude leather belt. Dusty, sun-burned, covered all over with bee stings (how else do you think he got that wild honey?). All in all, a *very* strange sight. He'd look weird anywhere—even in California! No doubt about it. This was someone out of the ordinary.

Those in the crowd which flocked to him, at least those who'd been reading their Bibles, must have been reminded of Elijah. Elijah must have looked bizarre like that, too. And according to the record, he'd been about as forthright and abrupt.

But Elijah had lived eight hundred years before. He had been so out of the ordinary that people had come to believe that he hadn't died like everyone else but had been translated bodily into heaven. They expected him to come back. But not now. At some time in the distant future, at the end of the ages, on the Day of the Lord—which was an out of the ordinary expectation for an out of the ordinary time.

We understand that. We don't expect God to do extraordinary things with us, either. But he does, and when he does it startles us and maybe even frightens us a little.

John the Baptist not only looked extraordinary, his preaching was out of the ordinary, too. "Repent!" he said. "Confess your sins!" he said. "God's kingly rule has arrived!" he said. "Judgment day is at hand!"

Matthew and Luke give a fuller account of his sermonizing. The ax is right now aimed at the root so you'd better start bearing fruit. You are about to be immersed in the fire of divine judgment. You are about to be lifted by the winnowing fork of divine wrath. If there is no righteousness to be found in you, you are going to be burned like the chaff.

Well, the people were transfixed. They hadn't heard anyone preach like that—not in well over three hundred years. John the Baptist's preaching was not your ordinary run-of-the-Sabbath homily.

Even the place where he was preaching was out of the ordinary. John the Baptist wasn't holding forth from the pulpit of First Church, Jerusalem. Nor was he thundering his call for repentance from a revival tent with folding chairs and garish signs and a Christian rock group whose job was to attract and hold the interest of the young people. John the Baptist was preaching in the

wilderness—a desolate place, a barren place—why, the buses didn't even run out there.

The *wilderness*—it's that part of God's good green earth which was visibly the most destitute of God's life-giving presence. Paradoxically, it's also the preferred place where God chooses to meet with folks and form them into his special people.

Another thing that was not ordinary was John's audience. Crowds flocked out to hear the out of the ordinary message of this extraordinary man. Mark says *everybody* from Judea and *all* the people from Jerusalem were there. Now the commentaries say that Mark was exaggerating with this detail in his narrative. What we have here is a little bit of poetic hyperbole.

That's not it at all. Mark is not counting the house and juggling the figures to try to make it look good. Mark meant that through John the Baptist God was summoning his entire people back out into the place where they had once spent forty long years completely dependent on God. God was calling all of the children of Abraham, all of the sons and daughters of Moses back out into the wilderness to be formed anew into God's people. A new exodus was about to occur. A special time of salvation had begun.

Another unordinary feature: John the Baptist expected folks who heard—really heard—his preaching to *do* something.

People who have been around religion for a long time, maybe even all of their lives, have usually learned how to accommodate themselves to demands like those, how to tone them down and assimilate them with the least disturbance possible. "Repent!" says the bumper sticker on the pick-up just ahead, then in small letters, "If you've already repented, please disregard this notice."

That's where we are. There was a time, once, when we were so startled we were moved to get honest with ourselves about ourselves. Moved enough to make fundamental changes.

But that was a long time ago. We're still glad to hear the call to repent once in a while, because we know so many who need to hear it. But it's not for us, because then we would have to admit to what our more uncharitable neighbors suspect about us: that through all those years our posture of piety has been liberally laced with hypocrisy.

What John expected the people to do was confess their sins, change their way of life, be *baptized*—an out of the ordinary demand.

Those people knew about ritual purification washings. They were commonly understood to be appropriate to the Temple area and in connection with Temple services and rites.

Of course, there was that group of religious fanatics—John the Baptist's cousins out by the Dead Sea. They believed literally Ezekiel's words:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you
and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness.

They were forever trying to wash themselves into purity. But who wants to be a religious nut like that?

Those folks who crowded around John also knew of the ceremonial immersion of proselytes, used as a rite of entry into the community of Israel. But

they were all born Israelites. They didn't need that.

Extraordinarily both types of washings were embraced in John's intent.

What John's demand for baptism asserted was that genealogies didn't count anymore. In this new time of salvation, this new exodus, God was forging for himself a new people. Jew and Gentile alike were all proselytes. You weren't included by accident of birth. You had to choose to be included. What you had to choose was God.

Now comes the most extraordinary thing of all. John baptized Jesus, someone without sin.

Now that's something new and out of the ordinary even for John the Baptist. Yet that's the only reason we remember this out of the ordinary man. Charles Carlston noted (*Proclamation 3: Epiphany*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984, pp. 18f): "Neither his clothing nor his baptism nor his charism nor his message nor his following nor his death is responsible for the central place (of John the Baptist) in a thousand pulpits this Sunday in Epiphany. That place is due to his association with Jesus."

Thereby John, the shrieker of judgment, becomes John, herald of the gospel. Carlston remarks, "He is by no means the last preacher of hellfire and damnation whose message is transformed by a loving God into good news to those who come after."

The whole thing wasn't necessary, of course, because Jesus needed cleansing from moral or cultic impurity. That disturbed John for a moment. With charming candor he called his role as celebrant and Jesus' role as recipient to be unacceptably inappropriate. It just wasn't necessary.

That's true. Jesus didn't require ritual cleansing. When John the Baptist baptized Jesus, Jesus was baptized as the head of new Israel. He was the first to choose God fully, which is to say, he knew himself fully to be chosen by God.

The divine theophany confirmed it—the descending spirit-dove which was the consecration and empowering of Jesus to messiahship, and the voice of God proclaiming his Son to be the sovereign who serves and the servant who rules.

It didn't end there, thank God! John knew it wouldn't. He called Jesus greater than he was because Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit, not just with water.

How badly John underestimated. Jesus did baptize and empower with the Holy Spirit all who, hearing his call, chose God and were united with Jesus, the new Israel. *All* of us, down through the centuries, from the greatest to the least—all of us are greater, said Jesus, than that out of the ordinary man, John the Baptist.

The story goes on to say how the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness, that region most destitute of God's presence. So he continues to drive all of us who are baptized with the Holy Spirit—out into our wildernesses of arid spirituality and of bleak human relationships, out into the wildernesses of social and judicial and economic oppression, of nuclear terror, of hurt, poverty, hunger, loneliness, despair.

He drives us out, and bids us be the presence of Christ—an out of the ordinary people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.