

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*January 8, 2023*

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## Into the Water

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I don't know about you, but Christmas feels like a bit of a sprint to me. We have four long weeks of Advent; weeks where we focus on anticipation and waiting. Then Christmas arrives in a flurry of activity. We go from a month of longing for the coming of Christ to his birth on Christmas Eve and the twelve days of the Christmas season. It almost feels as though Christmas gets short shrift.

Perhaps this is unsurprising since we don't really have a ton of detail to the nativity story. Matthew and Luke are the only authors who give us anything about Christ's birth. And a few verses in Luke are the sum total of what we hear about Jesus' childhood, that whole business about him getting lost from his family for three days because he wants to be at the Temple, his "father's house." (see Luke 2:41-52).

But even in the account of the nativity, we gloss over a lot of other stuff that happens in order to focus on the miracle of the birth itself. So I thought a quick reminder of some of the things we often don't look too closely at would be good. We'll stick with the Gospel of Matthew though, don't worry!

Matthew's Gospel account begins with Jesus' genealogy. Forty-two men, neatly grouped into sets of fourteen, comprise most of this genealogy. But then Matthew shocks us by including five women in this family tree, something unheard of in the culture of the time. And not just any women, but some rather remarkable women: Tamar, who was widowed twice and is wronged by her father-in-law, Judah;<sup>1</sup> Rahab, a resident of Jericho and a prostitute who sheltered the Israelite spies;<sup>2</sup> Ruth, a Moabite and a widow who must secure an unusual marriage from Boaz;<sup>3</sup> Bathsheba, the woman

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 38

<sup>2</sup> Joshua 2

<sup>3</sup> Ruth 1-4

whom King David lusted after and arranged murder over;<sup>4</sup> and then, of course, Mary, an unwed teenage mother.<sup>5</sup> Why does Matthew include these unusual women in this important genealogy?

After this genealogy we find the author describing the birth of Christ along with five foreboding dreams. Four of these dreams come to Joseph and one to the magi. All of these dreams have to do with the circumstances of Jesus' birth as well as the dangerous forces arrayed against him. We have a clear contrast between earthly king Herod as "king of the Jews" and the prophesied peaceful reign of the promised "king of the Jews." It's no wonder Herod will order the murder of the baby boys of Bethlehem, he can brook no challenge to his power and authority.

All of these forces drive the holy family to Egypt of all places! Remember that Egypt has been a historic enemy to the Israelites. The Hebrew people were enslaved there for multiple generations, and we read in the start of Exodus how the pharaoh ordered the killing of all male Hebrew babies (sound familiar?). Then there's the long and bitter political history between Egypt and the Israelites after they establish Israel as a nation. And yet, it is Egypt that will become a place of safety for the newborn Messiah. Eventually Herod will die and Joseph returns from Egypt with his family to settle in Nazareth.

There, that's the stuff of Christmas that we often gloss over! But it's important too, and our Baptismal narrative today continues many of the themes that have already appeared in these first few chapters of Matthew. So now we find John the Baptizer out by the river Jordan. He's an unlikely figure, the son of a priest, he rejects the priesthood and the Temple-system in favor of the life of an aesthetic. He wears itchy camel hair and eats some odd food; locusts, which were often instruments of God's judgement or used to describe the swarming nature of Israel's enemies (who were often a part of God's judgements against Israel),<sup>6</sup> and wild honey, a food often used to signify abundance.<sup>7</sup> Judgement and providence. Law and Gospel. There's clearly something compelling about this odd fellow from the wilderness. Compelling enough that large crowds are flocking to hear his message and be baptized by him.

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Samuel 11

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 1

<sup>6</sup> cf. Exodus 10:1-18, Judges 7:12, Jeremiah 51:14

<sup>7</sup> cf. Exodus 3:7-9, Numbers 14:8, Deuteronomy 11:9

Into this tableau Jesus arrives. And to John's shock Jesus has come in order to be baptized as well. Why? Why would Jesus need to be baptized? Especially given that John's water baptism (versus the Spirit's fire baptism) is for the forgiveness of sins. That's a baptism that Jesus simply should not need. What sin is there that Jesus would need forgiveness for? It makes no sense! And John agrees, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matthew 3:14b)

So why does Jesus enter into the water of the Jordan River? Why does he subject himself to this immersion? Jesus tells us in verse 15 that it is "to fulfill all righteousness." But what does **that** mean? What does fulfilling **any** righteousness mean, let alone **all** righteousness? We can argue about that, and many do, but in my understanding, righteousness has to do with living as God wants us to live or being who God created us to be. At the most basic level righteousness has connotations of "right action" or "right living." So I tend to view this statement by Jesus as having to do with fulfilling God's will for his life. And what is God's will? That Jesus is Immanuel, God-with-us.

Jesus descends into the water in order to identify with all of those who entered it before him. All of those repentant sinners who were washed clean by John. All of those broken people who knew that things weren't right in the world. And not just those that went before! Jesus descends into the water in order to identify with all who will enter it after him too.

Jesus descends into the water because he is God-with-us. Jesus descends into the water because he is from a long line of broken, odd, and unusual people. He is God-with-Tamar and God-with-David. He is God-with-Mary and God-with-Abraham. Jesus descends into the water because he has been in danger since birth. He is God-with-the-murdered-children and he is God-with-Herod. Jesus descends into the water because he knows what it's like to flee for his life to a strange and foreign land. He is God-with-the-refugee and God-with-the-asylum-seeker.

Jesus gets into the water out of a deep solidarity with humanity. Every point Matthew has made thus far in the Gospel has served this one message, Jesus is God-with-us. This baptismal scene is no different. Jesus gets into the water in order to be with us. In order to be with you! And this action fulfills "all righteousness." This action of solidarity is Jesus living out his very identity, Immanuel. And this beautiful righteousness of solidarity well-pleases God. Jesus identifying himself with broken, dirty sinners, is exactly what God's beloved Son is about. What amazingly good news! Amen.