

Deep In Scripture

*Text and Discussion notes for March 8 & 15, 2006
Matthew 3:1-17*

Introduction:

- All of Scripture has what you might call layers of meaning:
 - This has been recognized throughout the history of the Church and this is based upon how the biblical writers themselves understood Scripture.
 - I.e., OT events & people are seen as types or examples of NT events & people, "for our example . . ."
 - The literal / actual historical account, what it teaches about, for example:
 - John the Baptist
 - The man Jesus of Nazareth
 - Response of the people
 - Also, the underlying meanings, applications, about:
 - The People of God or the Church
 - Jesus the Christ / the Messiah
 - You and me in our walk with God
- We'll be spending two weeks on this chapter; it was intended to be read & studied together, not as 2 or 3 separate stories, but we'll need more than 1 hour.
- Sections of the story:
 1. 3:1-4 The Faithful Messenger / Forerunner
 2. 3:5-7 The Response of God's People
 3. 3:7-9 The Unfaithful Messengers
 4. 3:10-12 The New Message / prophesy
 5. 3: 13-15 The One who was to come
 6. 5:16-17 The Confirmation from Above
- Begin, as one always should, by examining the context: "In those days"
 - Luke gives the specific details (literal context)
 - Matthew vague (he presumed his Jewish audience knew full well when):
 - Assuming & bringing forward the condition of God's people described so far in the first 2 chapters:
 - 2:3, "Herod & all of Jerusalem with him" were not ready!
 - The leaders of God's people had not been faithful messengers!
 - 3:3 They should have known, they should have been the voices, even if it meant stepping apart from their false compatriots, & prepared the people, but they failed!
 - So God had to send a hand chosen alternate messenger: John
 - "those days" vs "these days" after we have the benefit of Christ!

I: The Faithful Messenger

- 1: *In those days came John the Baptist,
preaching in the wilderness of Judea,*
- 2: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*
- 3: *For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,
"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord,*

make his paths straight."

*4: Now John wore a garment of camel's hair,
and a leather girdle around his waist;
and his food was locusts and wild honey.*

- **Came John the baptizer:** no intro; Mt knew audience knew
- **Preaching in the wilderness of Judea:** literal . . . where . . .
 - **Q:** Why not preach in the city, the streets, go where the people are?!
- **"Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand"**
 - **Q:** K of God in Mk & Lk: Why K of the heavens in Mt?
 - Means essentially the Rule / reign of God; but not in laws or commands, but in a person; HE who we have been awaiting is at hand / (perfect) has already come; is in our midst.
 - **Repent:** metanoia = not exactly confess sins but turn away from false idols / beliefs/ and back to God;
- **For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah . . .**
 - Mt helping audience connect the dots - - who Jn the B is in salvation history;
 - This brings to his audience's mind lots of OT references to the precursors . . .
- **Now John wore . . . and his food was . . .**
 - Jn submitted to prophetic description of the precursor (Elias) . . .
 - He also chose the wilderness over the city of man, abandoning all of man's luxuries & staples, submitting himself to the providence of God, living on whatever he could find; detachment.

II: The Response of God's People

*5: Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan,
6: and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

- Normally the faithful went TO JERUSALEM to worship, submitting to their leaders;
- Here **Jerusalem and all . . . went out to him**
 - **Q:** How long was preaching out in the wilderness *alone*?! Patiently waiting for an audience? Complaining to himself / God? Wondering whether he had misheard God? Then someone rides past lazily on a camel, stops, listens, laughs, waves a hand in derision, and rides away; then another comes, then another, until finally "all" have come. Now he is too busy to second guess himself! He is fully into his preaching, come what may!
- **The region about the Jordon (wilderness)**
 - Recalls journey of God's people from wandering in the wilderness, crossing thru the waters of the Jordon into the promised land;
 - Turning into God's direction involves first facing up to & turning from the wilderness of our lives, submitting to baptism in the Jordon.
- **they were baptized:** ~ ritual cleansing; not sacramental; not cleansing of Gentile proselytes; outward symbol of their metanoia; a forerunner of what is to come.
- **By him:** a problem for him!! [Jn 1:24-25 goes into detail]
- **In the river Jordon:** recalls Naaman cure of being washed in the Jordon.
- **Confessing their sins:** the power and freedom of the wilderness away from the paralyzing pressures of the familiar.
 - **Q:** Was this merely Jn assuming that they were confessing their sins to God in the silence of their hearts, or were they confessing aloud first so Jn could hear and then confirm with water baptism? (probably the former)

III: The Unfaithful Messengers

7: But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sad'ducees coming for baptism,

- he said to them,
*"You brood of vipers!
 Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
 8: Bear fruit that befits repentance,
 9: and do not presume to say to yourselves,
 `We have Abraham as our father';
 for I tell you,
 God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.
 10: Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees;
 every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit
 is cut down and thrown into the fire.*
- **He saw [amongst the crowd] many of the Ph /Sad coming for baptism**
 - **Q:** Who are these people?
 - The ones who *should* have been the voice(s) warning & preparing the people
 - **Q:** Why are they coming? (curious? Jealous? Fashionable? Interested?)
 - **Coming:** doesn't say any of them were baptized.
 - **"Brood of vipers!"** Jesus would continue with this; *ess* = sons of Satan!
 - **Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?**
 - Very interesting, loaded rhetorical question!
 - "Duh, the prophets!" *Then why didn't you listen, warn, prepare yourselves & prepare the people?!*
 - "Flee the wrath to come?! Who said anything about fleeing? We just came out here to see what all the fuss was about!" *I picture every eye on them, accusing, confirming John's indictment.*
 - **Bear fruit that befits repentance:**
 - Indicates that Jn holds out hope for them!
 - But leaving the comforts of Jerusalem, going out to the desert, down into the Jordon, confessing a few convenient sins, submitting to water baptism, is not enough:
 - Their hearts & lives need to show this change:
 - Involves their submission / obedience coupled with God's grace: fruit is a result / a outgrowth of an inner change.
 - **and do not presume to say to yourselves, `We have Abraham as our father';**
 - Jn confronts their unspoken presumption (cf. Jn 8:33);
 - Note: their faith is built upon being sons of Abraham NOT on being the sons of the God of Abraham!
 - **for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.**
 - God created /chose Abraham and his descendents; all that Abraham & his descendants have came from Him; he could chose a new people!
 - **Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**
 - Jn uses farming illustration his agrarian audience would surely understand; reminds me of the Multaforarose on my farm. As a plant it is worthless, fruitless, nothing but a thorny hindrance; if not controlled it spreads everywhere very quickly and eventually overtakes the land making it useless. It can't be controlled merely by surface trimming, or even cutting it down to the ground! If there are roots left, it will reemerge and become as big as ever. Today we have poisons, but short of this the only way is to remove it at the root!
 - Fruitless leaders in the midst of God's people invest the people, making them unfit for God's kingdom; surface cleaning is not enough; their lives must show fruit befitting repentance; otherwise judgment;
 - And with the kingdom of the heavens in their midst, coming, the judgment is

near!

IV: The New Message / Prophecy

11: *"I baptize you with water for repentance,
but he who is coming after me is mightier than I,
whose sandals I am not worthy to carry;
he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*

12: *His winnowing fork is in his hand,
and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary,
but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."*

- **Q:** What is the "old" prophetic message? (what were they waiting for?)
- **The New message:**
 - **The Kingdom of the heavens is at hand (3:2)**
 - **"I baptize you with water for repentance"**
 - Jn now has probably turned his attention to his receptive audience; those who have surrendered to him, his message & baptism;
 - Symbolic / a prep for what is coming . . .
 - **but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry;**
 - Not false, Uriah Heep type, humility; almost a self-reflection, to those who are inappropriately adoring him, following him;
 - **he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.**
 - **Q:** What OT prophecies, if any, would have prepared his audience to understand what he is talking about? (Ezekiel; Jeremiah)
 - **What does this mean?** Not symbolic but actual sacramental change, purification and indwelling of God.
 - **His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."**
 - Jn returns to farming imagery, uses different but familiar farm task to illustrate similar act of judgment, but different stage of farming:
 - Axe at root of worthless trees: clearing fields for planting or for better production;
 - Winnowing: the harvest!
 - Merely using winnowing fork to throw harvested wheat up into the air will not accomplish separation; wheat & chaff will fall again together; requires the mysterious work of the wind! == the Spirit! The farmer depends upon the wind / spirit of God to separate the good wheat from the polluting chaff, which is fruitless & sent to the fire.
 - The Holy Spirit that one receives at baptism will winnow that person, at the results will be determined by his fruit!
 - **Will burn with unquenchable fire**
 - He has left the farm imagery, turned his gaze on the false teachers in their midst, and ess. said they are going to hell!

V: The One who was to come

13: *Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.*

14: *John would have prevented him, saying,
"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"*

15: *But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now;
for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."
Then he consented.*

- **Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.**

- Very purposeful & specific; Jesus hadn't merely happened along on his camel, stopping to see what all the fuss was about, and then like the people became moved & went down to be baptized.
- God's specific plan / agenda; his baptism was an essential part of his plan of salvation.
- Emphasizes that baptism is an essential part of our salvation
- **John would have prevented him, saying,**
"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"
 - Of course he would have stopped him! Just like Peter stopping Jesus . . .
- **But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.**
 - **Q:** Why?!
 - Imagine if one of the soldiers nailing Jesus to the cross all of a sudden had a conversion of heart, understood who Jesus was & what was happening? He might have yelled, "No! I can't let this happen! Let him go!" or maybe if he truly understood why Jesus was dying, he might have yelled, "I should die in his place! Nail me to the cross!!"
 - What would Jesus have said? "Well done my son, you figured it out! Thanks, I was hoping I could get out of this!"
 - NO, he would have uttered that same words that he said here to John: "Let it be so now; for this it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."
 - In the mystery of God's plan of salvation—the Incarnation, the virgin birth, the presentation, the baptism, the preaching, the ridicule, the betrayal, the trial, the scourging, the cross, the tomb, the resurrection—all were necessary to fulfill all righteousness.
 - ALSO: he was making water fit for sacramental baptism (Aquinas)
 - ALSO: he was modeling for us what we must do; he went in first! (Like what Paul is saying in Phil 2:5ff)

VI: The Confirmation from Above

16: *And when Jesus was baptized,*

*he went up immediately from the water,
and behold, the heavens were opened*

and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him;

17: *and lo, a voice from heaven, saying,*

"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

- Jn had a mystical experience, not unlike John in Revelation 1!
 - None of the other Gospels indicate that anyone but Jesus & Jn saw & heard this.
 - Jesus & Jn were the only 2 there who could have understood;
 - **Q?** Why did God do this? For Jesus' sake? No, to confirm Jn that he had faithfully carried out his task, thru all the frustrations, and it was time to turn over the baton! This is given more details in Gospel of John . . .
- **Behold the heavens were opened**
 - The clouds merely pulled apart? Or the heavenly choir came in view?
 - Key: before this, the heavens had been closed! The redemption of Man had begun!
- **He saw the Spirit of God . . . and lo a voice from heaven . . .**
 - Jn experienced a revelation of the Trinity! The heavens have opened revealing a new experience / revelation of the reality of God.
- **"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."**
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Conclusion:

- More than merely a story about Jesus & his precursor or about the fulfillment of all the dreams of the people of God;
- We are in this story, especially during this time of lent:
 - We need to examine in what ways we have succumb to “Jerusalem,” the city & culture of man & the world;
 - We need to recognize that the time for facing up to the ways we have drifted from God is not “someday” but now, for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand; as the NT writers repeat over & over, he is coming!
 - We need to escape to the “desert” following the beckoning “voice,” to pray;
 - Thru self examination we need to prepare our hearts; are we producing fruit befitting repentance? Or do our lives indicate that we are only worthy of the unquenchable fire?
 - We need to confess our sins;
 - We need reaffirm what happened to us in baptism; if we’ve not been baptized, we need to ask why not? We need to follow Jesus’ example as well as the teaching of His Church in both the NT and Tradition;
 - Thru the sacraments given to us by Christ thru His Church, we need to receive again the indwelling of God;
 - We need to come forth from the sacraments knowing that, by the promise of His indwelling grace, we are cleansed & made different, expecting that in His way, he will confirm in our hearts & minds that what we have set aside & sacrificed and what we have believed & followed is true & is worth it!
 - And we need to remind ourselves that because of Him and what He did for us, we are now children of God, and our hope is that by His grace and our obedience to this grace, we may one day hear these same words, “Well done good and faithful servant!”