

*Son of God, God of Bread, Bread for fools*  
*Matthew 3.1-13-17*

This morning we return to the Gospel of Matthew to hear his story, his revelation of the Son of God. And as we've already been seeing and hearing since Advent, Matthew's version of the God of Bread is firmly rooted in the ancient story of the Hebrew people. This story about Jesus isn't the beginning of a new story. No...it *continues* the story of God's people...from a lineage that traces all the way back to Abraham to the story of Joseph and his brother and the Egypt stories. With the birth of Jesus, it isn't that God is doing a new thing. Rather...Matthew reveals a God who is continuing to be present, continuing to love and liberate, continuing to call all humanity and all creation to live in justice and harmony, seeking healing and wholeness for all, serving and loving each other.

The baptism of Jesus *continues* the story of the people of God.

But the thing with Matthew's storytelling about the Son of God is that it both continues the story, *and* it points to something that we hadn't seen before. Even as he continues the story of the Hebrew people, he is reinterpreting and re-imagining the ancient story. Matthew is a brilliant...and subversive storyteller! Part of his brilliance is that the story sounds unremarkable, quite ordinary. It's what we'd expect. But when we pay close attention, looking behind and underneath and listening in-between, we start seeing all kinds of extraordinary and remarkable things about this God of Bread, this Bread for fools.

And *this* community of hope is just foolish enough to listen to the in-between! To listen for the subversive revelations in this short story of Jesus' baptism, this story told in four verses.

But in order to see what's underneath and in-between, we have to step back and look at the context of the story.

Chapter 3 begins with John the Baptist. John is in the wilderness preaching that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. His words are good news to a people living under occupation, under the domination of foreign oppressors. John's words feed their hunger for righteousness, for heaven's justice. So they went to John, ready to be fed, ready to experience the Kingdom of God. They've been waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled for far too long.

So they go to the wilderness to be with John, to receive the bread he's offering. It doesn't take much to imagine the contagious excitement as they go. Their conversations were surely filled with anticipation, even as they remembered their ancestors who had also come to the river Jordan, who crossed it into the Promised Land. The crowds were eager and filled with expectation.

And they confessed their sins and entered into the Jordan River, ready for the life that awaited them on the other side of this baptism.

As John preached the Kingdom of Heaven, he told them about someone else who was coming. John didn't name him, but Matthew's listeners understood that he was talking about Jesus. And they also understood that he was recalling Joshua. These two men didn't just share a name...this new *Yeshua* would also deliver his people into a promised kingdom.

As John is preaching this good news and baptizing, he's pointing them to Jesus: "one who is *more powerful* than I is coming after me.... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand...the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now, when you hear this, what do *you* imagine? He's imagining a superhero! A towering, intimidating figure. Someone strong and mighty who, when he arrives, will burn with judgment. (We love our vengeance.) This is the image of the person they should expect.

And then Jesus shows up. Along with the crowds, he too comes to the Jordan to be baptized. And just like everybody else, he wants John to baptize him.

This isn't what John or the crowds expected. The person John told them about would have swooped in with an entourage of minions, commanding the attention of the crowds. That person would have taken over, diminishing John with his power and charisma.

So when Jesus comes asking to be baptized along with everyone else from Jerusalem and Judea, John says, "No! You can't! No! You have to baptize ME! You can't be asking ME to baptize you! I need YOU to baptize me!"

Let's pause to appreciate this scene. John has been announcing someone mightier than himself. Someone more powerful, greater. Mind you, John's already pretty mighty and powerful! But Jesus is going to be more...better! And instead...instead of Jesus coming with fire...instead of Jesus triumphing and towering over John (*show more/over*), Jesus comes *assuming a lesser* position. In a posture of vulnerability, he places himself *under* John...in need of John's baptism.

We can appreciate John's resistance and unwillingness. John wants the Christ, the Anointed One to show up. He wants Joshua the warrior to come and save him and his people. It *cannot* be that Jesus asks him for baptism. It does *not* fit into any of his categories for savior or messiah. It dashes all his hopes and expectations for a king who will defeat their oppressors and reign happily ever after in the Kingdom of Heaven. No! No! And No!

Jesus listens to John. Lets him finish. Then says, "John. Let it be so, now. For it is right for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

And in that one-sentence response, to those foolish enough to be listening to the in-between, Jesus articulates the rule of life in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Let's begin with the in-between.

“John,” Jesus says, “You baptizing me is the right way, it’s the right thing to do. You baptizing me fulfills, it completes *all* righteousness, all justice. It’s what God requires.”

If John and the people thought that baptism was about the forgiveness of sins, that’s not what Jesus is saying. For Jesus, this baptism by John is about the fulfillment of righteousness. It fulfills what is right, what is just. And what it looks like is Jesus, the one who is greater, submitting himself to John, the one who is lesser. Not only will Jesus go *under* the waters in baptism, but he’s also placing himself *under* John. Not over. Not dominating. Not more powerful. Not mightier. Not winning. The fulfillment of God’s justice looks like Jesus placing himself *in service* to John.

But just as surprising as Jesus’ posture of bowing low before John, is what precedes and what follows his one-sentence explanation. “Let it be,” Jesus says. Those words proceed. And when he’s finished his one-sentence explanation, we hear that John *consented*.

The Greek word for “let it be” and “consented” is the same word, *aphemi*. It means to release, to let go, to permit or allow. It means to forgive.

And we begin to see that the liberation and release and forgiveness that Jesus is proclaiming *begins* with Jesus. Jesus’ ministry isn’t just about him going around releasing and forgiving other people—it BEGINS with him embodying release and forgiveness. It’s first of all happening to him! The *posture* of his ministry is release—Jesus letting go of power over; Jesus releasing the more powerful position; Jesus submitting his power to those around him.

And so John too, let’s go. With his consent, John mirrors Jesus’ posture. He lets go of his expectations of Savior and Messiah. He releases...he forgives Jesus for not being an almighty, dominating, commanding and demanding Messiah. Jesus embodied release. John mirrors the same release and letting go. And we, fools that we are, we see Jesus’ invitation to us, to live embodying this same posture of letting go...of releasing...forgiving.

So John baptizes Jesus. And as Jesus goes under the water, ritualizing dying, enacting taking the lower place, the crowd hears the voice of God speaking over the waters. Just as the voice of God spoke over the waters at creation. And when Jesus rises, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended onto Jesus, God's Spirit in the form of a dove. And we hear the voice of God speaking, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." *If we have ears to hear, we will hear* these words every time we rise up out of the waters, every time release and forgiveness are embodied.

With remarkable subtlety and nuance, Matthew has told the story of Jesus' baptism, a story that *continues* the creation story. The waters of the river Jordan represent death, and they also represent the waters of creation and life. Jesus' baptism, and our baptisms, ritualize death. AND, baptism enacts birth, re-creation. In baptism, Jesus and we, are born again as daughters and sons of God. And every time we *release* ourselves to others, every time we *forgive*, we are remembering and embodying our baptism.

And Matthew ends this story of Jesus' baptism just as brilliantly, continuing the ancient story, re-imagining and re-interpreting as he goes.

The last time the heavens opened, they poured down rain, covering the earth. And when the ark came up out of the waters, Noah sent out a dove to see if it was time to leave the ark. And the dove didn't return. Now, here it is, resting on Jesus, assuring us, assuring all, that the Spirit of God is with us, always with us. Whether we're in stormy and turbulent waters or rising up out of the waters, God IS with us.

It's a beautiful ending to the story of Jesus' baptism. To the story of the flood. But it isn't the whole story, of course. Release and forgiveness as a rule of life is hard. And painful. It's a lie to think that it will be anything else.

Practicing release and forgiveness in a painful, hurting world isn't easy. Nor is it obvious what it means and what it will look like. But we get a sense of it right after Jesus' baptism. He's immediately sent into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. When he could have turned stones into bread to feed his hungry sisters and brothers, Jesus said No. When he could have taken a position of power, a position that could have changed the realities of a people under crushing occupation, he says No. Three times Jesus says No to invitations that would fulfill long-held expectations of savior and messiah.

The Son of God, the God of Bread, does not turn stones into bread. Instead, he feeds us the slow, hard bread of release and forgiveness...the bread for fools.

May we continue the story of God's people that Jesus, our Bread of Life, reveals to us.