

I try to reserve Thursdays as my sermon writing day. I've done all the prep work and have been praying and contemplating all week on the sermon, but Thursday is the day I sit down and put it all together. I work from home on that day as not to be interrupted, and I often stay in my pajamas all day. This past Thursday was rainy and chilly, so I was super excited about staying in and being in my pajamas all day. But, sometime during that morning, I smelled myself. I was like, Man, I stink. As much as I love being comfortable and staying in my pajamas all day, I really didn't want to smell myself all day. So, I took a shower and put on clean clothes.

On the basic level, that's what baptism is. Our stink, our sins, are washed away, and we are clean in the eyes of God. God's forgiveness showers over us, and we get a fresh start. Some days, we are content to stay in our comfort zone. We want to be comfortable and lazy. Other days, our own stink drives us to seek change, and we intentionally take steps toward transformation.

We see that in this scripture. John the Baptist was at a particular place at the Jordan River, preaching and baptizing people. He was making a name for himself and causing quite a stir. People were curious and traveling to this place to see what this was all about, yet they were leaving changed. It became a pilgrimage that many were making, and Jesus joined in.

Galilee is a region north of this place on the Jordan. Jesus traveled anywhere between 60-80 miles. Jesus didn't accidentally travel that many miles; he was intentional about his pilgrimage to the baptismal waters. "He came from Galilee to be baptized by John," verse 13 tells us

plainly. He didn't stumble upon it. He wasn't just going to check out the hoopla. He was going to be baptized.

Jesus didn't need to be baptized, like we need to be baptized, so there has to be another reason why Jesus was baptized. When Jesus told John to baptize him, John protests and said he should be baptized by Jesus. Jesus says, "For it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (v.15). I'll be honest. That verse didn't sit well with me. Jesus never did anything because it was proper. In fact, his whole ministry was the opposite of what was considered proper.

So, I looked at other translations to see how they interpreted this verse. The *New Living Translation* says, "It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires." Well, that one isn't much better. The word "should" implies there's an obligation. We should do it, but we don't want to. And, "must" implies we don't have a choice. Back to the drawing board. The *Common English Bible* says, "This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness." Hmm. Necessary? That still seems like it's a requirement. I just can't wrap my head around it being necessary or required for Jesus to be baptized.

The Message Bible sheds some light. It says, "God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." Ahh. Bingo. Let's look at God's work coming together in this baptism. First of all, God's prevenient grace, God's nudging, gets Jesus moving on this pilgrimage to the Jordan to be baptized. Once there, we can assume there was a stirring in his heart that he wanted to be baptized. He saw things clearly. He didn't explain it; maybe he couldn't explain it.

This was just something he felt that he needed to do. Something he wanted to do. He knew this is God's work.

And, when he came up out of the water, the heavens opened and the Spirit falls upon him (v.16). Boom. There it is. Remember that moment, that time the heavens opened for you, and angels sang, and you really got it for the first time. Remember your epiphany, your aha moment, when God was revealed to you. When you experienced the presence of God and everything made sense. You knew that this moment would change you. You would be different. This would be the beginning of something new, your transformation. Everything that brought you to this moment drives you to continue seeking and transforming your life to be more like Christ. This is what happened here in baptism.

For Jesus, this moment of transformation marks his commissioning to begin his ministry. Everything up to this point has prepared him for this moment, when he does what God has called him to do. Baptism for Jesus was a sending of himself into the world to serve and to love all people. It was not a selfish act; it was giving his transformation a higher purpose other than saving himself.

That's what our baptism should be too. Yes, it is a symbol that we surrender our will and ask for forgiveness for our sins, to wash off our stink, but there's a bigger purpose for our transformation than having clean clothes or a place in heaven. Our purpose is to arrive at the moment when we finally get it, when it all makes sense. When we welcome the heavens opening and the Spirit descending upon us. When we welcome God's presence and movement in

our lives. Our purpose of all of this is to dedicate our lives to serving God like Christ did. This is God's work -- to bring us all to the moment of transformation when we surrender it all and serve God.

In that sacred moment of transformation, God claims Jesus and announces his identity as his Son, his beloved. During our transformation, God claims us too as his own, and we are God's beloved. God loves us and is pleased with us when we open our hearts and welcome the divine into our lives. This is what life is all about – God's work coming together in this moment. This moment, our transformation, when we are forever changed, and we live to fulfill our purpose as God's servants.

Washing off our stink is required before we arrive at this moment. We must go through a process of surrendering and transforming before we become who God calls us to be. So, it is proper to rise from the baptismal waters. We should go on our pilgrimage and arrive at the moment of our transformation, when God's Spirit falls upon us and we're commissioned for service. This is God's work coming together in this moment.

On this day, we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord, but we also celebrate our baptism. We remember our baptism, that moment when we first got it and experienced the divine's presence. Many of us were baptized as infants, so that wasn't our moment. Our moment could've been at confirmation when we took on our faith ourselves, or at camp when we experienced God around the bonfire. Maybe it's the moment when we realized that we really, really stink, and God's grace washes us every day. We remember our transformation

and all the transforming moments along our journey.

If you have not arrived at this moment yet, seek it. Make the journey to the Jordan. Surrender your self-focus and change to a God-focus. Open yourself to the Spirit who wants to descend upon you and transform you. You are God's beloved. God has been working all of your life for you to arrive at this moment. Surrender to it. Embrace it. Welcome it. Your life will never be the same. You will have purpose and meaning. You are part of God's work, and it is coming together in you.

In closing, here is our baptismal covenant, our charge, based on Isaiah 42:
*You all are my servants, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon you; you are to bring forth justice to the nations. You need not cry or lift up your voice, or make it heard in the street. Be so gentle so as not to break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick.
Faithfully bring forth justice.
Do not grow faint or be crushed: the time will come when you all have established justice in the earth, and far lands wait for the mercy you embody.*

*Thus says God, the Holy One, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the Holy One,
I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,*

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.¹
May you take this covenant, the word from the Lord, into your hearts and take with you wherever you go. Amen.

During our closing song, I invite you to come forward and receive the sign of the cross dipped in the baptismal waters, as you remember your baptism, your transformation, your covenant with God.

¹ Steven Garnaas-Holmes. www.unfoldinglight.net.