

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Ronald W. Botts, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 13, 2008, the Baptism of the Lord, dedicated to the glory of God!

“The Rest of the Story”
Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our salvation. Amen.

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A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together...”

Today’s scripture tells of a singular event in the life of Jesus, and a pivotal day in the life of the world. Jesus comes to John to be baptized in the River Jordan. He arises from the water with confidence that God is affirming him to be the long-awaited Messiah. The time is now, and everything changes from this point on.

In recalling this moment all four Gospels relate the role of John back to the words of Isaiah. He had, indeed, prepared the way. He had done it faithfully.

Those who do advance work, crucial as it may be, often are not recognized for the service they perform. They are most often overshadowed by others who are dependent on them and build on what they have done.

During WWII the Navy construction battalions, the “Seabees,” changed the momentum of the conflict. They were landed soon after the many islands in the South Pacific were secured. It was their job to take the thickly-grown and uneven floor of the jungle and prepare it for the troops who would follow. In weeks they would have an airstrip in place, complete with barracks and mess hall and hospital. They were heroes who trudged and suffered, but few are remembered.

Robert Connor of North Carolina was one of those unsung men. In his letters home in 1944 and ‘45, he describes the conditions he faced:

“Our trip up was not without its air raids but they were without incident. We have several alerts here a day... It is quite a sight to see the tracers go up and the planes come down... We have certainly had our share of rain... The bugs around this place are about to drive me nuts. They are harmless, but get all over me, up my nose and in my ears...

“You sound as though your Mother did not approve of my living quarters. She does not realize how spacious and advantageous they are. Lots of fresh air - only a few steps in any direction to the toilet, running water - in fact, it sometimes runs right through the place, never have to sweep the floor, for whatever trash that is not washed out when it rains, is picked up by the pigs on the swing shift...

“Everything that was built on that island had to be cut out of thick jungle - that included every spot where a tent was pitched. The mud was terrific. The worst that I have ever seen. We built a fighter and a bomber strip there plus miles of roads and innumerable facilities for other outfits. We had little fresh food of any kind all the while we were there.”

It is either the roll of the dice, or the unique calling of such exemplary people, to do this kind of work. It all depends on how you look at it. This was the mission of John the Baptizer as well.

Contrary to those who today may think of John as some itinerant eccentric that Jesus came upon in the wilderness, the Gospels tell us a different story. It's clear that Jesus came to John intentionally on that day and not by chance.

According to the narrative in Luke, both of their mothers—Mary and Elizabeth—were kin. Therefore, the two of them were related as well. Because Jesus and John probably grew up in different locales, it may be that they knew little of each other. It is just as possible that they had considerable contact prior to that moment. No, it was not by coincidence that they met there by the river.

It does not appear that they were aligned in their ministries. Each had his own work to do. Nor does it seem likely that their disciples ever intermingled. What John did to prepare the way of Jesus is another part of today's account, another part of the picture. Would our story of Jesus be what it is if John had **not** played his part?

Jesus' calling was experienced in a vivid, transforming way. It fulfilled him and set his feet on the path from which he would never deviate, even to his death on a cross. The Gospels tell us that he went immediately from the scene of his revelation to the desert, there to sort out what all of this meant and to strengthen himself with the power that God would give him. This is yet another part of his baptism experience—and the rest of the story.

That movement into the wilderness was not only the next step for Jesus, but it is often our **own** journey as well. At times, we many have to take an untraveled road into unfamiliar territory, in order to know what we need to do now in our lives and to be better able to do it. When such times come to us we may naturally be resistive. They can be hard, even treacherous; often they're very lonely. The future is unknown when we go into this virtual wilderness but, being open to God's presence, we can emerge strengthened and surer of what comes next.

While we of course don't have the full indwelling of the Lord that Jesus had, our baptism tells us that we are also special to God. The more we open ourselves to the Spirit present in our lives, the more we can become the persons God created and intended us to be.

You see, baptism is a way of experiencing rebirth, a coming alive to a realization of God's will for our lives, and then receiving it gratefully as a gift. It can be powerful when our baptism—even if long ago and beyond our conscious remembrance—can be experienced in daily terms.

Our baptism tells us that:

We are God's own.

We are loved by God.

We have a purpose to fulfill in life.

We are given the ability to live in awareness of God's intention for us.

We can share the news of our gift with others, letting them know of the potential inside them.

Whenever there is a baptism in our congregation, it is **our** baptism all over again. We are reminded that the day is for us, as well as for those who come to the font. It is our transforming event, too. Sometimes it leads us into the desert and sometimes it confirms us where we are. But it always makes us more sure of God reaching out to us, and claiming us in love. These are the ties that will never let us go. These bonds are God's promise to us.

Amen