

We Don't So Much Choose Baptism, as Yield to Baptism, and Through That, to the Force of God's Love

As Matthew recounts the story of Jesus' baptism by John, the details told in the other synoptic Gospels are present, "but with an added feature," the Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander said in his sermon Sunday. "As Matthew tells it, John the baptizer is puzzled and confused. All sorts of broken, wounded, sinful characters are coming from near and far to repent and to be baptized, and there, standing in the line, is Jesus!

"It's a little much for John, so he objects. 'I need to be baptized by *You*, and *You* are coming to me?'

"John is perplexed, and the Church has shared his consternation for centuries. The Church has asked, *Why did Jesus need to be baptized?*'"

" 'Why, Jesus?' This question has been on our lips for centuries," Pastor Thelander continued. "Why, Jesus, do you come to *us*, when we should be coming to *you*? Why would you choose to do this?'

"And Jesus simply says, 'Permit it to be so; let go, and let it be.'"

"Matthew tells us that when Jesus comes out of the water, the heavens open and the Spirit of God descends on Jesus like a dove and lands on him. Now I don't know about you, but the image I have in my mind as I have always read this text is the image of a pure, lily-white dove coming down from the sky in a graceful, almost slow-motion kind of fashion, sort of majestically moving in a kind of sideways motion until it finally lands on Jesus."

Pastor Thelander then recounted going pheasant or quail hunting in Nebraska in his youth, when, near a line of thick brush, "we would encounter some doves. And guess what! These were not lily-white creatures majestically sauntering down in some kind of airborne waltz! These doves would come out of nowhere, and they would SWOOP down on us with speed, force and power. There was no sauntering, no floating, no drifting down. When doves want to catch something, they don't *meander* down. They don't *glide* down. They don't *waltz* through the air. They ZOOM straight to the target."

"When John asks Jesus, 'Why?' and Jesus responds by saying, 'Permit it to be so now,' what kind of language is that? This is the language of surrender and acceptance, is it not? Could it be that when Jesus says, 'Permit it to be so now,' that he is not so much *choosing* his baptism as he is *surrendering* to it? Jesus is surrendering to the fact that he is God's beloved—that he is the Spirit's *prey*, that the Spirit has sought him out and targeted him with the awesome force of God's love."

Similarly, when we ask why Jesus comes to us, "the answer comes back that through no act or ability of our own, we are *loved* by God. We are prone to run from God, to hide, to flee, but God is intent on loving us, seeking us and pursuing us. We are God's beloved. It is God's nature to love us, to (p. 2 →)



"Apostle St. Andrew", by El Greco (1541-1614), Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest. © Web Gallery of Art. Andrew was known in Greek-Christian tradition as Protocleitos ("the first of those called"). As the Gospel lesson will tell us Sunday, Andrew was a follower of John the Baptist when John exclaimed about Jesus, "Look! There is the Lamb of God!" Then, as we'll hear, "The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother, Simon, and tell him, 'We have found the Messiah.'"

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Sundays

10:00 a.m.: Word & Table service

11:30 a.m.: Refreshments, conversation

11:45 a.m.: Post-service discussion

6:00 p.m.: (First Sundays only) Evensong, tea & refreshments

Thursdays: 6:30 p.m.: Evening Prayers. 7:00 p.m.: Singing & discussing hymns.

Readings, 1/20: Is. 49:1-7; Ps. 40:1-14; 1 Cor. 1:1-9; John 1:29-41. **1/27:** Amos 3:1-8; Ps. 139:1-11; 1 Cor. 1:10-17; Mt. 4:12-23.

Prayer Emphases: Maldives; International Pentecostal Church of Christ; First Baptist Church (Tusawilla), Winter Park, FL, and the Rev. Esmond Hilton; acolytes, including Sheila Ross, Matthew Peltzer and Andrew Thelander; parishioners on Beach Street.

(Sermon, cont'd.) seek us out, to *target* us for Himself, to *hunt* for us. Now typically we think of baptism of something that we *choose*. . . . But I don't think Jesus *chose* baptism as much as he *surrendered* to it that day in the Jordan River. And I wonder: what if each of us viewed our baptisms not as something we chose, but something to which we yielded and surrendered? For to what are we yielding and surrendering? To the awesome, inevitable force of God's LOVE, to the reality that long ago, before we could speak at all, let alone speak God's Name, the Spirit of God targeted us—and at our baptism, the Spirit of God "swooped" down on us to gather us in and to empower us to take our place in God's promised reign of peace and justice. . . . I invite you to yield yourselves, to surrender yourselves, to God's love."