

Joining the Mission

Isaiah 42: 1-9

Matthew 3: 13-17

It was a dismal Sunday morning but Harry was going out anyway. He pulled out of his driveway in his sporty 2-seat convertible with the top cover up because of the driving rain. He was headed for church. As he turned onto the main road, he saw ahead three bedraggled figures huddled under a single umbrella at a bus stop. They looked familiar.

One was old Mrs. Fletcher. She still insisted on getting to church by herself, despite her arthritis being always worse in wet weather.

There was Dr. Jones, the local family doctor.

And the third person was Judith. Harry had had a crush on Judith for the past six months since she joined their church, but Harry had never had the courage, or the opportunity to ask her out.

Harry had mere seconds to decide what to do. There was only one spare seat. Who should he offer a lift to? But in those few seconds, Harry figured it out.

He pulled to the curb by the bus stop, jumped out, passed the keys to Dr. Jones. Dr. Jones helped Mrs. Fletcher get into the passenger seat before scampering into the driver's seat himself. Now standing at the bus stop, Harry waved good-bye to them as they drove off to church in his car and he huddled close to Judith under the umbrella and waited for the bus with her.

Smartly done, Harry. He took a couple of bold and faithful steps, and you could say that he joined Team Judith.

In today's scriptures, we're confronted by the bold and faithful steps that God has initiated for servants of God's Kingdom, and we see how the faithful respond. Let's recall that God doesn't pick the "Most Likely to Succeed" nominee. We see God's peculiar choices throughout scripture, if we're paying attention. As we said during Advent, God has a habit of picking nobodies. Noah and Abraham didn't have anything special going for them. Moses was a fugitive in hiding. David wasn't even considered as the successor to be king. Even Elijah made a great show of his faith in God, only to run in fear when the tables turned. Mary (and Joseph) were the nobodies to whom I called attention a few weeks ago.

Turning to the reading from the prophet Isaiah, we have the announcement from God of "my chosen one in whom I delight." We might believe this is the announcement of new king or at least a messiah who will liberate God's people and restore the nation's independence. Several clues make us realize that this "chosen one" doesn't have that kind of nationalistic mission. This 'chosen one' bears the Spirit of God and is empowered to bring justice to the nations. But he won't be leading an army. He won't be

whipping up the masses with stirring words. He won't be taking the judge's seat in the court. He'll be known for his gentleness, his sensitivity, and his humility. He will achieve justice by his faithfulness alone. The servant of God will not be discouraged. He'll be faithful to his God. That will be enough.

Then through the prophet, the Lord explains his purpose for his people, how they are to be part of the mission of his servant. God says: *I have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles.* God's chosen people will be a covenant light for **all** people, serving in the cause of justice, too; to open blind eyes, to free the imprisoned, and liberate those in darkness. All things have been working toward this end, God explains, the former things and now new things that God will share with his faithful *before* they even happen.

There is one problem, a significant one. This is a one-sided conversation. God's people are being called to do God's work. The missing element is the enthusiastic response of God's chosen people. It's like they're concerned that this is a team that may not be doing all fun stuff. 'Being part of such a sacred undertaking is an honor, buuuut I've got some issues. Y'know, this big agenda is a hard fit in my calendar. It may impose on my resources and cramp my style. And it's definitely going to cause conflicts with whatever we're used to doing. Besides, who wants to deal with a bunch of complainers?' While we don't actually hear the people's response, we can listen to our own hearts and feel an anxious, ambivalent spirit stirring.

We may want to hear again what our team is to do: serving in the cause of justice, to open blind eyes, to free the imprisoned, and liberate those in darkness. "Gee, I'd like to help, but"

We find a different attitude when we hear Matthew's account of Jesus coming to the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist. We realize that God has chosen John to baptize and Jesus to receive baptism. The order will not be changed, even though John questions it in Matthew's version.

In Matthew, Jesus sees his baptism by John as 'necessary to fulfill all righteousness.' That expression is difficult by itself. "Righteousness" is a favorite Matthew word, like in the Sermon on the Mount: *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for **righteousness**, for they will be filled,* and *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of **righteousness**, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven,* and *unless your **righteousness** surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of heaven.* 'Fulfilling all righteousness' refers directly to the Kingdom in Matthew, and what is required to fulfill God's will to advance the Kingdom. (By the way, "righteousness" is a favorite word of Paul, too, but his use is rather different.)

Quite simply, what we see is Jesus looking to join John's team. We know (and listeners to Matthew's gospel know) that Jesus will have his own team soon enough. But for now, for the sake of the Kingdom and its righteousness, Jesus wants to join John's

team. It was surely widely known that Jesus had an association with John's community of the baptized, but like the other gospel authors, Matthew isn't dwelling on this. Even though the gospels are written several generations after Jesus, there were *still* communities of those baptized into John's mission alone. The gospel writers were focused on Jesus and wanted nothing detracting from their story about Jesus, but they also couldn't omit John's role from their accounts; it was too fundamental and critical for understanding Jesus' Kingdom mission.

A couple of puzzles emerge. John's baptism was for repentance and forgiveness of sins. Did Jesus sin and need baptism? Is this the issue for Matthew? If Jesus didn't sin, how can we say Jesus was fully human? Another puzzle is that Jesus gets baptized, but Jesus never does any baptisms during his ministry, and never tells anyone to go get baptized. Yet the earliest apostles all insisted on baptism. Then there is baptism in the spirit and fire versus water baptism, all of which takes us deeper and deeper down a rabbit hole of no return.

A *good* question at this point is: what is it about John's team? What did it mean to be baptized into the community of John's people?

Jesus isn't the only one who has gone into the desert to find John the Baptist. There are lots of people coming out from Jerusalem to join up with John. Again' we've ask, *why* are they coming out to be with John the Baptist?

John sees not only the sinfulness of all of God's people, but he also perceives the corruption of God's word in the religious institutions, in the Temple in particular.

Human sinfulness is a given, but God promises forgiveness. Yet the tradition itself has been manipulated to put conditions on that forgiveness, hurdles God never intended. To get right with God, God's people are told to make sacrifices and offerings. Sacrifices and offerings cost money, money that people did not have. John knew God to be just and righteous, thereby concluding that the temple priests and religious institutions had corrupted God's loving forgiveness in order to line their institutional and personal pockets.

John believed that the corruptness of religious institutions, servility to the Romans, and the resulting enslavement of the people was so overwhelming that God would soon have no recourse but to intervene and save his people once and for all. But woe to those who trusted in the fraudulent institutions and its sinful leaders. Woe to those who let themselves be seduced by the corrupt normal and who failed to turn to God. John establishes his community far from Jerusalem. His community is designed to bring people to repent of their sins, and to receive forgiveness and new hope with baptism into John's community of new life.

Jesus is disillusioned by the religious establishment, too. John the Baptist is someone who understands what God requires and Jesus wants to be part of that, an alternative religious community, a community of reform, renewal, and, even in some respects, rebellion from the powers-that-be in Jerusalem.

After the baptism, we hear God's words identify Jesus as his beloved Son and God's delight in Jesus. Like the servant in Isaiah, like John the Baptist, Jesus shares a mission to advance the kingdom of God.

This is the Sunday when we acknowledge and recall Jesus' baptism, when Jesus is revealed as the Son of God, a uniquely intimate level of chosen-ness. But the words of Isaiah continue to shadow this event: the chosen one of God is to lead the people of God, serving in the cause of justice, to open blind eyes, to free the imprisoned, and liberate those in darkness.

In our own baptism, we join this team, belonging to Jesus and his mission. Our baptism challenges us to be full players, on the starting team, first string. We need to identify with our baptism, serving the Kingdom of justice and righteousness that Jesus heralds.

We learn today who Jesus is. The question remains: *who are **we** to the mission of Jesus?*