

Choices

The Baptism of Jesus

Is 42: 1-9, Mt 3:13-17

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Isaiah 42:1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. Thus says God, the LORD, 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 LORD, 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. I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Dear Abby, my best friend and are both 15 years old. She is so much cooler than I am and I wish I could be just like her. She is strong and independent. Everything her parents believe in, she's against. She knows just what she wants. I want to be like that but I'm not brave enough to disagree with everything my family believes in. How can I be brave enough to be as strong and independent as my best friend? Signed, Wishing.

Dear Wishing, your best friend is not as strong and independent as you believe that she is. Even though she disagrees with everything her parents believe, their beliefs are still shaping hers although it is only by rejection. She has not made any choices of her own. True strength and independence come from understanding different beliefs and finding what is true for you. In time both you and your friend will find what you each truly believe in. Those may or may not be the same beliefs and choices that your parents have.

I remember being a teenager and seeing this letter in the newspaper. As I read Wishing's words, they could have been mine. I wanted to be like my friends who were bolder in rejecting everyone else's ways of saying I should or should not behave or believe in a certain way. I wanted to reject their restrictions. But Dear Abby's response caught me off guard. What I

thought was independence was really immaturity. Over the years the wisdom of that letter has stayed with me, and it has come back to my mind when I am wrestling with, reconsidering, a belief and find it changing because of life experiences and situations. Some choices and beliefs I hold have not changed since I was a teenager sharing my parents' beliefs although I have long since claimed them as my own. Yet others have shifted over time, some nuanced, some completely flipped over.

Our truest spiritual, religious, political and lifestyle beliefs and practices have emerged from conscious choices, they have been re-examined default thoughts. The ancient wisdom of Socrates rings true on the importance of examining, scrutinizing, our beliefs to be the highest version of ourselves. An unexamined life is not worth living", is a bold statement. By truly examining, exploring, what is of value is the virtue of fulfilling the full potential of our purpose. What we believe shapes who we are. Who we are shapes what we believe.

It is not enough to think simply, casually, about our spiritual, religious, political and lifestyle beliefs and practices, but rather to dive into them, to look at them from different angles, to reflect, to pray, about what is the truth for us. This is to take ownership of -and personal responsibility- for who we are. To do other wise is to sleepwalk through our lives.

Thinking about our life choices and beliefs- those made for us and those we make for ourselves- we are ultimately choosing how, or even if, to follow the life path God has set before us.

And as we make these choices in our lives, we can also wonder what must it have been like for Jesus to consider his own life path, and the choices set before him.

Since childhood Mary and Joseph would have told him the stories around his birth, of the manger, angels, shepherds and Magi, and of the blessings in the temple from Anna and Simeon when he was circumcised. They would have talked about his teaching in the temple before he was even a teenager.

Studying the Scriptures, what would it have been like to hear, to read, the words of Isaiah, and to know that they were for him? "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. I am the LORD, 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."

Immersed in the awareness of who he was, God Incarnate, Son of God, we can only imagine how he prepared himself for the ministry that lay ahead for him as he approached his cousin John on the banks of the River Jordan.

John preached of a baptism for forgiveness of sins. Why then would Jesus have begun his earthly ministry seeking forgiveness of sins he did not have?

This was not a casual act, a simple participation in an action. Jesus had to have carefully considered how to step into the role, the life, he was born to live. He must have carefully reflected upon how and where his earthly ministry would begin. Once he was introduced to the people as the Messiah man-no longer the Messiah child- Jesus, Emmanuel, there would be no turning back. He chose to leap in boldly, leaping into the very experience that many people flocked to John the Baptist for, as despite his wild appearance and harsh message, people wanted to be ready for the coming of the Messiah. John was their hope.

By joining the crowds, "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem," who gathered around John to be baptized, Jesus began his public ministry by identifying with all those who were seeking light in the darkness, all who were seeking teaching and truth, all who were seeking healing and redemption. He identified himself with the faults and failures, the pains

and problems, of all the broken people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters of baptism Jesus identified with those who responded in faith to John's call. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside us. At his birth, Jesus was given to us. At his baptism, Jesus chose to be with us, to stand by us, to stand with us.

Alongside the river, John was incredulous that Jesus was seeking baptism, yet Jesus simply responded, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus' choice to be baptized was for grace-filled empathy and loving connection with the broken, hurting, anxious people who had been waiting for him. Still dripping wet after John had plunged him into the Jordan River, Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision — the affirmation of God that Jesus was the beloved son, and the descent of God the Spirit in the form of a dove. God's confirmation of this beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry signaled the meaning, the message and the mission of Jesus as he went public.

By the power of the Spirit, Jesus embodied God's unconditional love of all people everywhere as he chose to walk with us. Our baptism, and later our Confirmation, is our choice to walk with Jesus. Amen.