

Baptism of Our Lord – 12Jan2020
Matthew 3:13-17

Watch This!

With my childhood, as I prepared to do something stupid, that phrase was accompanied by the reminder that show-offs always get hurt. On this day when we're looking forward to a summer Boundary Waters trip, the phrase makes me think of teaching our young people to leap off of rocks and cliffs. Watch This! And then comes a big splash.

John the Baptist didn't want to make waves, but Jesus would have none of it, saying Do it! It's proper to fulfill all righteousness. John gives in and dunks Jesus. Making a splash with a different outcome of show-offs getting hurt as it points toward his death, Jesus leaped into the water of the Jordan River shouting Watch This! Though technically his phrase is less succinct; his Watch This is that it's "proper to fulfill all righteousness."

These are the first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Matthew. First words are important to pay attention to, just as the final words of Jesus are how this Gospel ends: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And remember I am with you always, to the end." So these first words serve as a grand Watch This to everything that will follow.

To know what we're supposed to watch from Jesus, I did some word searching this week with the "fulfilling all righteousness."

Fulfill is a word that Matthew likes to use. Though we're only a couple readings into this year of Matthew, we've already heard fulfillments as part of the formula quotations that Matthew uses at least ten times about Jesus. The first was before Christmas, that "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son'" (1:22-23). Just after Christmas, we heard three more details Matthew saw as fulfilling Scripture (2:15, 17, 23). Most everywhere Jesus

was going or what was happening to him seems viewed by Matthew as a fulfillment, all the way up to his betrayal, arrest, and death.

Matthew wants us to know that this is how it's supposed to be, that this goes with who God is and what God wants. That's a helpful reassurance when Jesus is killed—that it wasn't a complete interruption or defeat of what God wanted, but was in line with it. Jesus fulfills God's vision.

My word search found that fulfillment wasn't only about old bible verses that Matthew says applied to Jesus, not only that the prophets were predicting Jesus or something. It's also just a word for "full." Nets are full of fish (13:48), and holes are full of dirt (Luke 3:5), and children are full of wisdom (Luke 2:40).

So that's also saying that the full meaning is found in Jesus. He fills up biblical understanding. He fully shows what God wanted. He has all authority. Jesus is how God says Watch This.

But what about righteousness? Being full of righteousness doesn't usually sound good to us. It sounds like being totally self-righteous, though that doesn't clarify much of what Jesus and John were wanting us to watch while splashing in the water.

It is helpful to know that the same Greek word can be translated either as righteousness or as justice. Matthew sees Jesus coming to set everything right, to make it fair, to make it just as God wanted.

Of the seven times Matthew uses the word, five are in the Sermon on the Mount, so we'll come back to them in a couple weeks as Jesus tells us in Beatitudes that those who hunger for righteousness or for justice are blessed, and you're blessed when you're persecuted for striving after it.

Which may mean Matthew is saying to us that even if it's proper to fulfill all righteousness, all justice, maybe it's not easy. This is the show-offs getting hurt aspect of when Jesus tells us to Watch This. Things going along with what God wants may still lead through tough times, through confrontations, even through death. Striving for God's justice can be hard. Yet as horrible as it

may be, what God is doing is not defeated or even very ultimately interrupted.

That may be a main part of what Jesus is saying here and what we watch for in his whole story. Eventually, even though Jesus is crucified, God is still working in it. As Jesus does things that challenge popular culture and maybe even would seem religiously or ethically dubious, still he is fully showing God for us, and showing us how God is striving to set things right, to include outsiders, to reach out to all nations, to heal the sick, to break down the barriers that would keep us from each other. What's God want? Watch This!

Today, as Jesus says it is proper in this way to fulfill all righteousness, a very basic part of what he's asserting is that he needs to be baptized by John. This is what's right, John. So do it, even if you don't like it.

Just before this, John had anticipated that the Messiah would arrive thundering with blazing fire to strip the forests bare, clearing the unrighteous out of his way, like an ax to clearcut with sharpened ferocity. The coming Messiah would be so powerful, John predicted, that John wouldn't even be worthy to stoop down and tie his shoelaces.

It's revealing to set that image alongside the Jesus who, in another Gospel, himself stoops to wash his disciples' feet on the last night of his life. Still at that moment, the closest disciple Peter was protesting, saying he should be washing Jesus' feet and not the other way around. Watch This can seem like something stupid is about to happen.

Here the greatest forerunner, John the Baptist, says he wouldn't even be good enough to get near Jesus' feet. John expected chainsaws and fire power. Instead Jesus shows up with a gentle dove. That is what God wants. Rather than taking charge and pushing others around, rather than clearing them out of the way, Jesus shows up and asks to be baptized by John, submits to John, humbles himself.

Now, a first reaction of ours is likely to be similar to John or to Peter: that Jesus is doing

something stupid. We expect God to come blazing in. If what God wants is justice, then why doesn't God blow away the oppressors? Why would God be subject to persecution? If God wants life, then why does God die?

These questions don't get answered for us. They just get countered. If you predict that the powerful God will wipe out enemies, will hack away at foes, will ferociously eliminate what stands in the way, then you need to be reoriented to the God of the Bible, to the God known in Jesus, to the God marked by a dove and by love.

It is proper in this way to fulfill all righteousness. This is the right way fully to display what God wants, to embody it, to bring it to pass. Watch This.

Though this is about what we're supposed to watch for in Jesus, it also offers a reminder in our own lives. When we are hankering after achievement and wanting to prove ourselves, when we wonder how well we measure up, we are met by Jesus, wading out into the water to take a dip and telling us to Watch This. It shows that righteousness isn't self-righteousness, not about being show-offs in the old way, not about how rightly we live or how right you say things are going in your life.

With a splash of water and with all authority, Jesus declares that righteousness is fulfilled. We want to argue and make it different, but God says in baptism it's all right. It is all fully right.

That is the declaration to you with a splash, too, in baptism, that there is nothing ultimately wrong, that you are filled up with everything right. Or, as the very voice of God declares in the story, in baptism you are directly called a beloved child of God. With you, God is well pleased.

As you emerge from the water, filled with that promise of new life, of things made right, you dive in to follow Jesus' wet footprints through the rest of his story. You see the way of justice, of setting things right with and for others. As Jesus goes through death, you see that even those sufferings and obstructions of goodness won't ultimately overwhelm the declaration of God's blessing for you, God's efforts on behalf of life.

You can take the leap and take your risks, and even if you always get hurt, you have assurance on the other side. And we keep returning for another splash of this water, to be reminded of that connection to Jesus, of his connection to and work for you, of that perpetual promise of love. Watch This: he makes everything fully right, and he is with you always, to the end.