

Jesus Among Us

January 12, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Emma Mitchell

Texts: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Please, will you pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable to you, oh God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Good morning, beloveds! How blessed are we in the leadership of the young people in our congregation, amen?? It's so fun to be leading worship with you, Christian.

So – big questions. Today, I want us to reflect together on the story of Jesus' baptism as it relates to one of the beautiful questions you all have sent in. The question goes like this: Preaching the Trinity often emphasizes the Divine aspects of Jesus and his life. But where do we get glimpses of the human Jesus, and the ways in which he faced some of the same challenges that we do? Such a good question!

Before we dive in, I have to tell you about a dream I had a few weeks ago because I think it's prescient for dancing with these kinds of big, mysterious questions. In my dream, I was supposed to give a sermon to this big multigenerational group of people, somewhere special, and either I had absolutely nothing prepared, or I had totally lost my notes and couldn't remember what they said anyway. Have you had dreams like this, in which you're totally unprepared? In my dream, I thought, okay, okay, I can do this, I was a teacher – we'll just have a robust discussion and co-create the sermon. And then I looked for the scripture reading on which the sermon was based, and it was nowhere to be found – I couldn't remember where it was in the Bible, a Google search only turned up random images that were no help at all. I couldn't even remember any relevant lines of a Mary Oliver poem. So eventually I found myself turning to the group of expectant

people around me, and, very teacher-like, asking, “so, does anyone remember what this story is about?”

I woke up, thankfully, and today we have both a powerful scripture in front of us and I have my notes. It’s the little things, right? But sitting inside these big questions can feel that way sometimes, can’t it? Totally disoriented, up the river without a paddle, and even scripture is sometimes nowhere to be found.

The risk of centering sermons around big questions is that it sets us up to expect answers, so let me just say right now, in case my dream wasn’t proof enough, that I don’t have any simple or ready answers. Instead, I am with you in these big questions. It’s a privilege to get to walk alongside you in them, to explore them together, and think and feel and worship out loud together. Our Christian stories ask us, over and over again, to dwell with these big mysterious questions, and to remember that certainty is often the opposite of faith. We are a questioning people. We are a mystery people.

I love what the poet Rainer Maria Rilke says about questions – he says, “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.” So let us live the questions now together.

Imagine with me that we’re with Jesus back on that day of his baptism, by the shores of the river. Maybe there’s birdsong around us, the birds rejoicing in the promise of water in that dry climate. I can imagine that the crowd of people there with us are eager, maybe apprehensive, to be immersed in the waters of the River Jordan, but they’re there, seeking to be cleansed and renewed. And Jesus is among them. Jesus is among us.

I imagine that the river Jordan that day of Jesus' baptism was flowing steadily. I wonder how warm it was. I wonder if it was silty from traveling through the country. I wonder what animals visited its banks to quench their thirst or play in the water and glimpsed a group of human animals, one at a time, guided under the water by a man with wild hair, surfacing dripping and renewed. I love picturing people wading into the river with John, their clothes beginning to float around them as they wade deeper, sinking in eventually to their shoulders, and then immersing themselves fully in the river. I imagine the refreshment of that water in a hot climate, and the refreshing of their souls that they experienced, welcomed back into the veins of the Earth for that moment, cleansed by the water and by God, reminded that in the wholeness of their humanness, beauty and foibles and all, they are a sacred and necessary part of all Creation.

Luke's gospel says, "Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying..." The late great preacher Fred Craddock says that two of the most important words in this story are Jesus also. Jesus also. Jesus was among the crowd that day, one of the many people seeking cleansing and the redemptive power of water by his cousin John's hands. Luke is specific about what this baptism represented: repentance and the forgiveness of sins. And so we meet Jesus in the crowd as a fully human young man, responding with others to John's invitation to be dipped in the veins of the Earth, to be cleansed, to get out of their own way so that they could more freely walk the path that God made them to walk, so that they could follow God with more faith and courage.

In this story, Jesus enters the waters of the river of human life with us as another human being, as one of the crowd seeking a ritual of repentance and cleansing and courage to walk his path with God. He is all-in with us, in solidarity with us, immersed with us in the ALL of it. He is one of us.

Back when I had just graduated from college, I was living in Rhode Island, teaching 5th grade and sharing a home with a few other women. One of

these friends had been raised without a religious tradition and was pretty sure she was an atheist; the other had been raised Catholic. And then there was me, you could call me Christian plus, having been raised in progressive churches like this one and also feeling closer to God in the woods than anywhere else.

One evening, as we were cooking, my atheist friend asked, “so, why Jesus? Why do you both worship Jesus?” We paused. My Catholic friend said, “for me, I worship Jesus because he is a model and guide for us. We seek to be more like him – he was the perfect human, divinity incarnate.” We were quiet for a moment. It was one of those moments of realizing how many diverse truths can fit inside one tradition. Because for me, I shared with them then, Christianity is exciting in part because divinity exists in the humanness of Jesus. Jesus was courageous and loving and prophetic, and he also got angry and fell asleep while his friends were freaking out and was susceptible, like all of us, to persecution and death. He was human. And if we believe, as scripture tells us, that God is in him and with him, that he is God’s beloved child, then it is our humanness, our foibles and uniqueness’s, our joys and mistakes, our very being that makes us God’s beloved children, too. God is in and with our embodiment. Incarnational theology, God embodied, speaks to the spark of the divine in all beings: in trees, in us, in birds, in fungi, in LIFE itself. The indwelling of divinity that doesn’t require our perfection, just our us-ness, to glorify God.

What I love about the story of Jesus’ baptism is that it holds both my friend’s connection to Jesus and mine. Jesus is immersed in the river of life with us, he is among us, he is fully human with us, AND in Luke’s story, written a hundred years after his death and after the disciples’ experience of Easter, we meet the Jesus who is emerging into his identity as the Messiah. Luke’s telling says that when he emerged from the water and was praying, “the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

I love the poetry of this passage. The Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. This is a passage about Jesus' identity as the Messiah, but it is also for us. Because at this moment in Luke, Jesus is about to set off into the wilderness to be tested for forty days, after which he'll return to Galilee and begin his ministry in earnest. Cleansed by baptism, full of the power of the Holy Spirit, having met himself differently in the wilderness, he finds the courage to step into his fullness in service of God.

Who among us hasn't needed the reassurance that we are beloved children of God as we go about our lives, as we seek to align our steps with God's justice and love? Who among us hasn't needed the blessing of the Holy Spirit, the reminder that the spirit is in and with us, as we prepare to do hard things? Who among us hasn't needed a ritual that helps us get out of our own way so that we can more faithfully and courageously follow God? Who among us hasn't needed to be dipped in the river veins of the Earth and reminded of our fundamental belonging to all of Creation?

Jesus did. And so do we. Jesus also. Jesus is with us on the path, with us in the river, reminding us what it takes to commit to a path of conversion. He is with us in needing the Holy Spirit, needing reminders of God's love, to find his courage. And he is with us in breathing the Holy Spirit into us, so that our husks might be separated from the grain of us, so that we might be liberated from that which holds us back, and filled with the courage and love and humility to follow God, as Jesus did.

Amen.