

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17

***“The Start of Something Big”***

Today's Gospel lesson from Matthew is such a powerful event, how powerful you might ask, that it has been recorded in all four of the Gospels, today in Matthew 3: 13-17, Mark 1:9-12, Luke 3:21-22, and John 1:32-34. That means that you can 'take it to the bank.' When something appears more than once – it is important. It is like when you say 'holy.' Holy is wonderful, if you say something is 'holy holy' it is incredibly holy, but if you say 'holy holy holy' like God is – get out of the way and let Him do His stuff. The fact that it is recorded in all 4 Gospels, because each Gospel, as Deacon Bob just recently told us that each Gospel was written for a different audience. This covers the gamut – so everyone can hear the fact – and we will talk about that today.

What took place in the Jordan River that day, I personally can't even begin to imagine what it must have been like witnessing heaven being opened and then, for the very first time being in the incredible physical presence of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Through this God stresses the importance that Baptism should have in our lives. Baptism also indicates the importance of water in our lives – for cleansing and refreshing. There is nothing like taking a dip in a nice cool pool on a hot summer's day. There is nothing like getting into a shower and washing off the day's stuff. You are feeling clean and refreshed. Water is incredible – it nourishes us as well. It takes care of a thirst that some of us might have on a dry day. I believe that the main reason for the Holy Spirit's visible presence at Jesus' baptism was to demonstrate that He was empowering Jesus for what the Father had called Him to do. Remember that even though Jesus is God – He is also human – and so He needed that empowerment. And then, God the Father spoke from heaven and made it clear that He was pleased with Jesus. Up until that point – Jesus had lived in relative anonymity in that little town called Nazareth. He had not performed a single miracle, preached a single sermon, or begun His public ministry. This was the start of something big!

Do you realize that the Holy Trinity outwardly affirmed the divinity of Jesus, meaning that He was/is God? It happened in the very same water that parted many years before, so that the Ark of the Covenant could cross on “dry land” into the Promised Land – recorded in Joshua chapter 3, when the feet of the Levite priests touched the water –and the water rolled back. God was giving Israel a reminder that they were entering the Promised Land the same way they left slavery in Egypt – as recorded in Exodus – and it was on dry ground – by His miracle, and His power! There is no doubt about it.

The place that this happened was just north of the Dead Sea, across from Jericho in the very same water from which Elijah's chariot of fire ascended into heaven – right after the waters parted for Elijah when he touched that water with his cloak – and he walked across on dry ground; and then Elisha did the same thing and parted them with Elijah's cloak. *“And when he also had struck the waters, they were divided here and there; and Elisha crossed over.”* (2 Kings 2:14) These were times that God parted the waters – once at the Red Sea and three times at the Jordan River as a sign of His presence and power – covering His people. And now we

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read of John the Baptist gave even more proclamation of Jesus' identity for all to hear – at that spot in the Jordan near Jericho. Only this time the waters weren't parted –but instead the heavens were – as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove -- and God the Father spoke. This was no ordinary place – and this was no ordinary man! God the Father speaking pointed directly to His Son, Jesus, and God the Holy Spirit appearing as a dove also pointed directly to Jesus. There is no denying the evidence that Jesus is the long-promised Messiah – God's anointed Son – who would carry our sins to the cross and teach us how to live.

John the Baptist apparently was not a shy person. He got in trouble speaking up and testified to what he witnessed; to what he saw and heard – that Jesus as the Messiah would baptize people with the Holy Spirit. Incredibly, most Jewish groups in Jesus' time believed that the Holy Spirit was not as active in prophetic inspiration as it was in the Old Testament. They felt that God had stopped speaking to them through His Holy Spirit when the last Old Testament prophets (Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi) died. There was a long period of time between Malachi and Matthew. For many of the people who listened to John's claim that through Jesus - the Holy Spirit was present, and that Jesus would be baptizing people with the Holy Spirit, it must mean that the Messiah had come or was near.

Jesus did not officially begin His public ministry until John the Baptist had been put in prison by Herod Antipas. Do you remember John's words that "*After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.*" (John 1:30) John the Baptist was physically born first – you might remember that his mother Elizabeth was pregnant when Jesus' mother Mary came to visit - and the child John leapt in her womb at the presence of the baby Jesus in Mary's womb. I believe John's words of "*after me*" signified that Jesus would begin His ministry "*after*" John. John the Baptist was put in prison because he told Herod Antipas that he shouldn't be marrying his brother's wife. You know the rest of the story about the beheading and so on that took place with John the Baptist. Right after His Baptism, Jesus would go off into the wilderness where He fasted for forty days and forty nights – and was tempted by Satan – but did not sin. Following Jesus' temptation in the wilderness He went to the Galilee region and met the beginning of the twelve disciples at Capernaum, where they lived and worked as fishermen.

Jesus was prepared for His ministry by His baptism in the Jordan and His temptation in the wilderness, and now was His time to publicly begin serving the world. Jesus would receive word that John the Baptist had been arrested and therefore the work of the one who "*prepared the way of the Lord*" was now complete. Jesus then goes to Nazareth and to Capernaum beside the sea. Jesus begins to proclaim the presence of the kingdom of God by word and by deed (or action) – as Matthew writes "*teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people.*" (Matthew 4:23) We read this morning that Isaiah said the Messiah would be a light to the Gentiles, open eyes of the blind, free captives from prison, and release from the dungeons those who live in darkness. That was the prophesy that Jesus would fulfill. John the Baptist was telling people to "*repent for the kingdom of God is near*"- in essence to change their behavior

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and I do believe that Jesus said the same thing. Jesus is a great light who appears to those who sit in darkness – He has come to rescue those who are captives to sin. There is no doubt about it. Once you have Jesus in your life – that is the start of something big.

I want to share with you the words of John the Baptist who testified about what he had just witnessed that day in the Jordan: "*I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'*" I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God." (John 1:32-34) There is no doubt about it – this was the start of something big!

All of this should very strongly signify to us the importance of the sacrament of Baptism – and the blessings and benefits that are received in it. The Holy Spirit, through water and the anointing of oil, is imparted upon the one receiving the sacrament, and the cleansing that takes place - rising to new life with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The words are simple "I Baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Then the anointing of oil and the sign of the cross is made on the person's head – and they are sealed as Christ's own through the Holy Spirit forever. It is a very powerful event in the life of a person – one that we believe is so special that it only needs to be done once.

You know - Jesus' Baptism was not the only time that God the Father spoke about Jesus. There would be one more time where God the Father would speak similar words to the world – and that was on the mountain of "Transfiguration." Jesus took Peter, James and John – who you might call the inner circle, to a mountain in the north of Israel, and "*a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. **Listen to him!**'*" (Matthew 17:5) Oh if the world would just do that. Take the words of Jesus – if you have a Bible that has the red letters – you can very easily listen to what Jesus says, by reading them out loud to yourself. If the world would do that we would not be in the mess we are in in many places. "**Listen to him!**" I would hope that each one of us would take those words seriously and do all we can to carry them out.