

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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Sermon, January 15, 2023

Matthew 3:13-17

Sometimes life gets overwhelming. The bills on the kitchen table get out of hand, the medical conditions in our bodies become unmanageable, the communication dynamics in our families, or lack thereof drive us crazy, the atmosphere in our workplaces becomes toxic. And don't get me started on the situation in the world or in our city. Just a few weeks ago the temperature here in Louisville plunged to seven degrees below zero. They opened up the Broadbent Arena and two hundred people took shelter there, just trying to stay alive. Just this week, there was a drive by shooting near the home of one of our members.

Life can seem overwhelming, and sometimes we can feel tempted to throw up our hands and say "There's nothing we can do. The problems are too complicated, too big for us. All we can do is pray!"

Sounds good, doesn't it. We pray, and maybe God will wave a magic wand and make everything all better. That happens sometimes, but not always.

Usually, when we pray, God sweeps us up into the solution, which takes time, and work, and comes about, step by step, not all at once, and often results in things different from what we asked, different from what we expect.

Why? Why doesn't God just wave a magic wand and make everything all better for us? Because God chooses to be human with us.

In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus comes to John the Baptist, to be baptized. Many people ask, “Why does Jesus need to be baptized? Baptism is a washing away of sin. Jesus didn’t sin, so why does he need it?”

Even John the Baptist says, “You should baptize me. I shouldn’t baptize you.”

And Jesus says this quirky thing: “Let it be so now, in order to fulfill all righteousness.”

Now, that would not make very much sense if we think of righteousness the way we usually think of righteousness. Usually, we think of righteousness as obeying all the rules. Jesus is already righteous because he has already obeyed the rules, the Ten Commandments and so on. So clearly righteousness is fulfilled already. What more should he have to do?

That’s if righteousness, at it’s core is about obeying all the rules.

But if we understand righteousness as it is presented in the Biblical witness, then it begins to make a little more sense. In the Bible, righteousness involves rules, like the Ten Commandments, yes. But at its core, Biblical righteousness is not just about rules. It goes deeper. It’s about relationships.

How do we fulfill a healthy relationship with God, with other people and with ourselves? That’s biblical righteousness. It’s about relationships.

Jesus wanted a relationship with us. Back at the beginning of Matthew, remember? He was called Emmanuel, “God with us.” Jesus is with us. So, Jesus goes through the things we go through, with us. We need to go through Baptism, to be washed from our sins, and in our Lutheran tradition we understand baptism to happen every day. Every day we are washed from our sins. Every day, we are turned back around to God’s life and hope and power and love.

This is not always easy, to be turned back to God every day. But Jesus comes with us. We are not alone.

Jesus was not alone either. When he is baptized in the Gospel lesson for today, the Holy Spirit comes to him, and a voice says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased.”

When we are baptized, the Holy spirit comes to us and says, “You are my daughter, my son, my child, beloved to me. With you I am well pleased.” This happens every day.

Jesus was not alone in the enormous, overwhelming task he took on. We are not alone either.

The Holy Spirit leads us in the midst of our bills and our medical conditions and our family and work dynamics, of our city and our world. Step by step, not all at once. Not with a magic wand. It takes work, and time.

We may not be able to get rid of all our bills, but we can pay some, or consolidate some. We may not be able to make ourselves completely healthy, but can we get a little exercise? We may not make our families and workplaces easy, but what is one healthy communication you can make with one family member or co-worker?

Back just before Christmas, when the temperature went down to seven below zero and everybody else was huddled under their blankets at home giving thanks for their heaters, Hope buss, in addition to feeding a hundred people a day at hope village and elsewhere, also fed those two hundred additional people just trying to survive at Broadbent Arena. Last year, I told you about this guy who goes and talks to families of people who have been murdered and to other folks to reduce the chance of revenge killings, to lower the murder rate from what it would be otherwise—one family at a time, bit by bit, dealing with gun violence in the city. I asked him, “If you could say one thing to the churches on the East End, what would it be?” He said, “Build partnerships with people on the West End. Work with them.”

We are building partnerships with people on the West End and on the East End. We are seeking to bring the Spirit’s strength to each other for our families and workplaces, our health and money.

We are not alone. The Spirit was with Jesus. The Spirit is with us. Thanks be to God.