

I've never understood why people want to be famous. I've cited Biblical bad guys' attempts at impressing people with fancy clothes, elaborate demonstrations of wealth and power, and self-aggrandizing building projects as evidence for their poor moral character. Yet in our time, some people go to great lengths to have even the proverbial 15 minutes of fame, sometimes even by doing harm to themselves or others, and while I think they're nuts, I find it difficult to condemn those who are harmless.

For me, I would never want to be featured in tabloids or hounded by paparazzi; I find the scrutiny that comes with being a member of the clergy to be stressful enough. And more to the point, I find far more satisfaction in having good experiences and doing good works than in getting attention for them.

On the other hand, I've enthusiastically supported efforts to raise Advent's profile. As awkward as I felt reaching out to the local newspaper and being interviewed and photographed, I didn't mind if there was a chance that people would ultimately be drawn to find God here, and have their lives transformed for the better.

I wonder how John the Baptist felt about his social role and visibility. Clearly, he was no shrinking violet. But he also lived in the wilderness, albeit not so remote that throngs of people couldn't come to him seeking answers and a second chance in their moral lives. Most importantly, he used the attention he got not to get anything for himself, but to create a setting of communal dedication to God, to prepare the people for the arrival of Jesus, giving them a sense of what Jesus was going to be about but mostly piquing their curiosity.

As a priest friend of mine pointed out, John the Baptist would have been an excellent announcer. If someone told me I was about to meet someone extraordinarily powerful, worthy of the utmost respect, and transforming lives by the power of God, you better believe I would stick around for that.

Jesus himself seemed to struggle with his own fame sometimes. On the one hand he was clearly a people person, showing up at festivals, teaching large crowds, going to dinner parties; but on the other, he sometimes found the constant demands of public life to be exhausting, and was known to take his disciples away to the wilderness for rest and prayer, and sometimes to seek solitude himself.

This story hints at both of those tendencies. Jesus's baptism was in a very public setting, but St. Luke tells us that the dramatic appearance of the Holy Spirit and the voice of the Father came not in the moment of his baptism, but afterward, as Jesus was praying. And although his baptism is often called the beginning of Jesus's public ministry, he didn't begin public ministry immediately, but rather first went alone into the wilderness to be tempted.

It's a good thing John the Baptist wasn't easily offended. I'd be a little upset if someone told me, "Sorry, I'd love to stay and hang out with *you*, but instead I'm going into the desert... to be tested... by the devil."

But we'll talk about that story later. Today's story is commonly called the Baptism

of Christ, but I noticed that St. Luke barely mentions Jesus's baptism. He mentions it in passing, as something that had already happened. Luke spends more words describing the theophany, that is, the visible and audible manifestation of God, than the baptism, and portrays the theophany coming at least as much from Jesus's prayer as from his baptism.

He spends more words still on John the Baptist, more than any other Gospel writer. So the theophany that concludes the portion of Luke's Gospel that we just heard comes across as the culmination and fulfillment of John the Baptist's prophetic ministry, and the decisive transition to the story proper, which will be focused on Jesus from now on.

Some would say that the baptism of Jesus is only a narrative device. They might argue that it makes no sense for Jesus to be baptized, for John's baptism is described as conferring forgiveness of sins, and an important aspect of Jesus is his having no sin. They might point out that while Mark is characteristically straightforward about it, Matthew awkwardly has John balk at baptizing Jesus, and has Jesus insist on going through with it, Luke barely mentions it, and John skips it.

First of all, when a story has the risk of undermining the Gospel writers' agenda, but they include it anyway, scholars consider that strong evidence that the story is historical fact. A story appearing in multiple Gospels is likewise an argument for historicity. And indeed, even the most skeptical scholars assert that Jesus's baptism, along with his crucifixion, are *the* two undoubtedly historical events of his life.

But that doesn't answer the question of why. I think there are three compelling reasons why Jesus did need to be baptized. The first is that while forgiveness of sins is an aspect of both John's baptism and of Christian baptism, as important as that is, absolution is only a means to an end. The core purpose is to connect us to God, and *show* that God remains committed to us, out of God's enduring love for us.

Another priest friend pointed out that in his experience, people seem to grasp this instinctually. When adults seek baptism, it's always because of a joyful desire to connect with God and the community of God, never because they are afraid of what might happen to them if they don't. And so while God does love all of us immensely, more than we could ever understand, there is a unique and perfect intimacy between the persons of the trinity, which brings me to the second reason why Jesus needed to be baptized.

Very simply put, God decided that humanity needed to know for sure that Jesus is divine. But despite all of the Bible's dramatic stories of God appearing to and interacting with humanity, God might be a little publicity-shy, too. Only generations after God's covenant with Abraham does anyone on Earth learn God's *name*. Despite the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem and its beautiful rituals, unlike other peoples who believed their gods to live in specific places, the Jews have always understood that God remains *invisibly* omnipresent throughout the universe. And God put King David off the

idea of building a Temple in the first place; that had to wait for his son, King Solomon.

So the manifestation of God in today's Gospel balances authentic modesty and humility with authentic power and glory. God reveals just enough to establish Jesus's divinity. I think of these moments like rare public appearances from beloved but publicity-shy celebrities. They are absolutely something to celebrate and cherish, and they give the season of Epiphany its festive character.

And by noting that Jesus was baptized in a setting of communal dedication to God, we come to the third reason why Jesus was baptized. Jesus's baptism is public because as important as we are to God as individuals, relationships with God always happen in community. The words of Christian baptism begin with the name of the person being baptized, because God calls us by name, in loving authority. However, our baptism doesn't just create a relationship between us and God, it also brings us into the church, the community of the baptized. Following Jesus is a communal practice.

But there's even more to this story than celebration and community. I mentioned how St. Luke spends a lot of time describing the ministry of John the Baptist. Did you notice that our lectionary skips a few verses? I've come to think that's a mistake, because while the first of the three verses skipped summarizes John's ministry, the rest summarize the consequences: "But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison."

John's fame caught up with him. Not only were ordinary people drawn to him, which would have been enough to stoke an insecure ruler's jealousy, but Herod's own soldiers were seeking John out on their own time, and asking him what they should do. Today we tend to think that messages can be either political or spiritual, never both, but John the Baptist, Herod, and Luke didn't make any such distinction. While the Gospel is not partisan, it is absolutely political. John told Herod's soldiers to do their jobs righteously, nothing seditious, but John also publicly named Herod's sins. I suppose that's one way to get famous.

But of course John was never motivated by a desire for fame. His zeal was the same zeal for God and God's ways that everyone who embraces a relationship with God should have. Being baptized connects us to God with a permanent bond of God's love, and being connected with God means we are meant to share in God's work of healing and liberation. Most of us are not called to be wild-eyed wilderness prophets, but God does have a calling, a ministry, for all of us. Hopefully we never have to tell a tyrant he can't marry his brother's wife but if we do, hopefully we do it with courage. If God's will for us happens to involve publicity, that's as a means to God's ends, not an end in itself.

Most of God's people will never become famous, and I think most of us are fine with that, but we all *will* be known to some people, so we all should ask ourselves honestly: for those people who do learn who we are, how do they know us? Would they

know us as someone who zealously lives out God's calling, always putting God's will before our own, or not? And if not, how might we get closer to the ideals of divine purpose that God has made known to us?