

Not a Spectator Sport

Matthew 3:1-17

This is a month for big football games – major college bowl games, including the national championship game, the NFL playoffs, leading up to the Super Bowl in a few weeks. Some of those games have been pretty one-sided and not particularly interesting to watch. But some of them have been really fun games, with the score going back and forth and the outcome in doubt right up to the end.

Football at that level is pretty obviously a spectator sport – there are very few people who are physically able to play the game in college or the pros. Normal people would get killed. Some college stadiums hold 100,000 or more of those spectators plus the millions who watch on TV. But no matter how great the game is, or how many people are watching, there are never more than 150, maybe 200 people who had any sort of direct impact on the outcome. Everybody else is just watching. You could finish one, and maybe not even have to change the channel to watch the next one. You had no impact on the game, and it had no impact on you. The outcome didn't change your life or probably anybody else's, really. You could watch it, enjoy it - or not – and forget about it.

That sort of reaction could never be said about an encounter with Jesus Christ. Every Gospel story from the shepherds coming to the manger and leaving with a story to tell, to the appearances of Jesus after his resurrection, leaving people with a story to tell – every Gospel story of an encounter with Jesus is a story of people being changed by the experience, whether they intended to be changed or not. The story of Jesus' baptism by John in the passage for today is a great example. We are going to read the whole thing, because I don't want us to miss the impact of this event on all the participants.

READ Matthew 3:1-17

There are a bunch of people in this story, and whatever any of them thought they were doing there, none of them wound up just being spectators.

John clearly did not come to this place to be a spectator. This was his mission, his calling, to bring a message of repentance to the people to prepare them for the coming of

the Messiah. This was a man with a clearly defined, clearly understood calling from God – known from the time he was announced by the angel to his father Zechariah and then to his mother Elizabeth. John knew he was there for a purpose – to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.

What about the crowd? This would have been quite a mixed bag of folks.

- There were the Pharisees and Saducees, experts and teachers in the law. They knew the prophecies of the Messiah, and had likely heard word of John's preaching and the description of his mission. They came at times to question and challenge John – some of them genuinely wanting to discover the truth in his message, but others of them were there to find a way to silence John because he was upsetting the status quo. We will hear that again.
- There were those who had a real, deep hunger for a prophetic message – not in the sense of a prediction of the future but prophetic in the real meaning of prophesy – a word from God. There had not been a prophet in Israel in 400 years – a long time for the people to have been without a messenger from God. John was such a messenger, and there would have been people in that crowd who had come great distances just to experience the word and ministry of a true prophet.
- There would have been people who had heard and understood John's call to repentance and were responding to that call. They had experienced conviction of their alienation from God, had come to realize the distance that they had put between God and themselves, and had recognized that a penitent, repentant spirit was the first step toward restoration of right relationship with God. These people were there to experience the baptism of repentance from John.
- There would have been spectators, people who were simply curious about this strange man living and preaching in the desert, delivering a message that was so completely different from anything that they were accustomed to.

Then there is Jesus. When we understand the nature of John's baptism – a symbolic cleansing for repentance – we wonder what Jesus is doing here at all. A baptism of repentance suggests sin and the need to be cleaned of it. John's reaction to

seeing Jesus here is understandable. What need did Jesus have to repent? What sin did he need to be cleansed of?

Jesus' experience of baptism was not the same as the other people, and not the same as ours. He had nothing to repent, no sin that needed to be washed away. He had no need of a public demonstration of His acceptance of grace – He was the personification of grace. No, Jesus baptism was different. His baptism was a demonstration of a submissive spirit, completely responsive to God's will. That is a perfect example for us – if Jesus, who could control the wind, was submissive to God's will for His life, why are we not? For us, accepting grace and forgiveness through repentance leads us into that kind of submissive spirit. But Jesus was already there, and His humbling of Himself to receive John's baptism was a sign of that submission, and cause for God to declare Himself well pleased. We should be longing for that sort of reaction from God. Jesus and John acted together in all this, which is what Jesus was talking about when He said "...it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus' time had come, and John's mission was being completed.

All these people experienced something extraordinary in this encounter with Jesus. None of them could have been mere spectators, because they had to have been changed by what they saw and heard. In the presence of Jesus Christ, they experienced

- the opening of heaven
- the Spirit of God descending
- the voice of God speaking

No one could have left there unaffected, unchanged. Whether they came to watch or to challenge or to actively participate, their experience would have to have moved them.

Here was heaven opened up. There were no barriers between the people and God – nothing to separate them from Him.

Here was the full Trinity – the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, all real and within their sight and hearing.

Here was God's announcement of the Messiah, God's Son, with whom He was well pleased. Messiah had come to restore them to right relationship with God, to save them.

Every encounter with Jesus was like that – God and heaven and grace revealed in Him all the time, everywhere. And every encounter with Jesus is still like that, whether we experience Him in the Word of God, in prayer, in worship, in the actions of His people. We still experience the risen Christ, present and live and moving. As Christians, it is a fundamental element of our faith that Jesus is as real now as when He was physically walking the land. But it is often hard to tell how this experience of His presence affects us any more than watching a football game – hard to tell if it makes a difference because we aren't telling anybody. In the accounts of Jesus' baptism in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Gospel writers move directly from the facts of the event to the story of the temptation of Jesus in the desert. Not a word about how the experience changed the lives of the people who were there. Our experiences, and our story-telling have to be different. Every one of us should be able to identify at least one experience of Jesus Christ in our lives – maybe not as dramatic as this experience at the baptism of Jesus, but no less real. The next step is to tell it – to understand first for ourselves that it meant something and that it makes what a difference to us, changes us, brings us closer to God.

Our encounters with Christ are not meant to be spectator events. We are not meant to watch or listen or feel and just go home or on to the next thing. Our encounters with Christ are meant to change us – to move us. If we are not changed by the revelation of God, of heaven, of grace, of the Holy Spirit, we need to ask ourselves "Why not?" Did we miss it, or not believe it, or were we just not willing to let it change us? And if we are not telling the story, we need to ask ourselves "Why not?" – because every experience of Christ has meaning for us and for His kingdom.

In Jesus Christ, heaven is opened to us, the glory of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is revealed to us, and the voice of God calls our name. Open your heart, open your soul to an encounter with the risen Christ – and be moved.