

## A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 3:13-17

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Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.  
John would have prevented him, saying,  
"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now;  
for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."  
Then he consented.

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water,  
suddenly the heavens were opened to him  
and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove  
and alighting on him.  
And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved,  
with whom I am well pleased."

This story is about two central relationships that are important in the development of Jesus as the Messiah. The first is with John the Baptist. It is implied that John is Jesus' teacher, but Matthew's concern is to make it clear that Jesus was more important than John. John is the one who acknowledges that.

The story is about the dynamics of relationship between John and Jesus. John recognizes and affirms his role in relation to Jesus and that he needs to be baptized rather than Jesus. It's not clear what Jesus means by "fulfilling all righteousness" but it probably means something like "this is the right thing to do." What matters is to convey his respect for John as well as his recognition that the right thing for him to do is be baptized by John.

The climax of the story is the description of the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus like a dove and the voice from heaven. How to deliver this voice from heaven is a decision that every teller of this story will have to make. My sense is that it is an intimate voice spoken quietly, not a big, loud, deep voice. It is the voice of a loving and proud father. It establishes an intimate personal relationship between God and Jesus.

There is really only one verbal thread that runs through this story: the phrase "to be baptized." This phrase begins and ends the first episode, and also begins the third episode: "...when Jesus had been baptized...."

The rest of the story is very clearly structured. Each episode ends with a response. The first two episodes end with John's response to Jesus coming to be baptized and the third ends with the Father's response. The third episode draws the picture of this incredible gift of the Holy Spirit, of the heavens being opened and Jesus seeing the Spirit of God descending like a dove and the alighting on him. This is an inside view. It's what Jesus sees. So the teller needs to convey that sense of Jesus' interior experience as he witnesses the descent of the Spirit.

This is a classic Trinitarian moment. God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are each present and active here. The expression of the love and honor they extend to each other is the challenge in telling this story.