

Taking a Stand

The Baptism of Our Lord; Series A
Matthew 3:13-17

This past December there were two portraits of Jesus that made somewhat of a splash in the media headlines. First, the case of Megyn Kelly, host of “The Kelly File” on Fox News. This one made headlines almost immediately when she announced to the world that both Santa Claus and Jesus Christ are white.

The second case comes courtesy of Stephen Prothero, who recently wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* about Christian writer and Pastor, Mark Driscoll’s portrait of Jesus. Prothero describes Driscoll’s objections to portrayals of Jesus of Nazareth as “a limp-wrist hippie in a dress” in favor of Jesus as “a prize fighter with a tattoo down His leg, a sword in His hand, and the commitment to make someone bleed,” as Driscoll insists (See Travis Scholl, “Who is Jesus, Depends on Whose Jesus it is,” in the *St. Louis Dispatch*, http://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/faith-and-values/civil-religion/travis-scholl/who-is-jesus-depends-on-whose-jesus-it-is/article_ff379e72-6743-11e3-a24d-0019bb30f31a.html).

Commenting on these two portraits in his religious column in the *St. Louis Dispatch*, the Reverend Travis Scholl attempts to sort through the confusion. “Let’s make sure we get two facts straight,” he says. “First, Jesus of Nazareth was *not* white. He was, in fact, a Palestinian Jew, which meant his skin color was likely not similar to Prince William’s. Second, Jesus of Nazareth *was* male. But he was neither a hippie nor a cage fighter. And it is highly unlikely he wore a tattoo. And, as far as we know, the only one he ever made bleed for anything was himself” (See Travis Scholl, “Who is Jesus, Depends on Whose Jesus it is”).

Scholl went on to make the interesting observation that the incarnation of God in the flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth opens up the possibility to translate Jesus not only into another culture’s language but also into its own system of images, symbols, and ideals. In this sense, the gospel story could become incarnate in any human story (See Travis Scholl, “Who is Jesus, Depends on Whose Jesus it is”). A stroll through the aisles of a Christian Book Store or a glance at the skin color and ethnicities of various characters in manger scenes, one can see just how common it is for various cultures to translate the person and work of Jesus in a way that is relatable and identifiable.

I bring to mind the two portraits of Jesus and the tendency for different cultures to translate Jesus with their own symbols, images, and ideas because this morning, on this day that we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, the Gospel reading presents us with its own portrait of the identity of Jesus for us that rivals all others that we tend to create with our words or our paintbrushes. By reflecting on the Baptism of Jesus we come to learn more about the identity of Jesus. It is the identity of Jesus not according to a certain demographic of 21st century America. It is the identity of Jesus that God reveals for us in history and through his written Word, the Bible. By taking some time to reflect on the Baptism of Jesus today we uncover the Jesus who takes a stand for us.

In our Gospel reading John thought he knew about Jesus. Perhaps similar to Megyn Kelly and Mark Driscoll, and even us for that matter, John thought he knew about Jesus and his mission in this world—until Jesus revealed himself in a way that John did not expect. John knew about Jesus and had a good idea of Jesus’ mission. John knew he was the one to

prepare the way for the Messiah (3:3, 11). He preached the coming day of the Lord (3:7, 10). He urged repentance and amended lives (3:8). He knew the Messiah would bring the Spirit of God (3:11). John identified Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the Sin of the World (Jn 1:29). Then Jesus shows up on the edge of the wilderness, leads John into the Jordan River *after all the people were baptized* and asks John to baptize him. John thought he knew about Jesus and his mission until he led him somewhere and to do something that defied the portrait he had painted.

John did not expect to see the sinless Son of God in those waters. The Evangelist St. Luke tells us that Jesus entered the waters of the Jordan River to be baptized *after* everyone else entered to receive a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Lk 3:21). Jesus' unexpected Baptism foreshadows his unexpected work of salvation. Through his Baptism he shows that he has come to "stand in the place of sinners." God is even in the places we might deem "God forsaken." He is Immanuel, "God with us," even in the places we would not expect him to be.

God is always more than we expect. And it is good that God does reveal himself in the person and work of Jesus in a way that is different and even more than our descriptions and portraits. Left to ourselves and there is always the tendency to make Jesus out to be someone he is not. We may be uncomfortable with and wish to cover up the Jesus who shows tender, gentle compassion comparable to a mother when he says, "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not" (Mt 24:37). We may try to toss aside the Jesus who shows great anger when he casts out the money changers in the Temple and flips over their tables (Mt 21:12-17). We may even get embarrassed and ashamed of a Jesus who was crucified and we may seek instead to speak of our Lord mostly or solely as a moral teacher, a friend, or a buddy, one who helps you out when you're in a tough spot. But that is not the Jesus that our God has given to us. In Jesus God has given us the one who "saves us from our sins" (Mt 1:21) and institutes the wine of the Lord's Supper as ". . . the blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28). The Baptism of Jesus shows us the truth of his identity as Savior even at the beginning of his Ministry, on the edge of the Judean wilderness, in the dirty, muddy waters of the Jordan River. There stands your Lord, waiting to receive a sinner's Baptism and begin his Ministry of standing in the place of sinners—taking a stand for you.

Amid all of the different and various portraits of Jesus and attempts to translate Jesus into a relatable, personable way into our lives and culture, let us make certain that we can also approach Jesus the way John and those he baptized did—with repentant hearts. Through his Word and Spirit God has the power to bring the Jesus that stands in the place of sinners for you. He baptized you for this purpose. So that you could be united to the Jesus who dies and rises to forgive your sins and bring you into a right relationship with God. He will lead you somewhere and to do something that defies your expectations of him. After all, you are following the Jesus who once said, "Take up your cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24). But in the end, this is the Jesus that will stand when all others have fallen—and he stands for you! He stands to forgive your yesterdays, to give you his grace today, and he will stand for you on the Last Day. Amen.