

## **"The Dilemma of Faith"**

*Reading: Psalm 2; Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:11-17*

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There is a classic ethical dilemma known as the Trolley Problem that goes something like this: suppose you're standing in a train yard and you see a trolley barreling down the tracks, out of control, heading toward five people who will surely be killed if it continues on its way. You are standing next to a switch that will divert the trolley onto another track and save those five people, but on that alternate track there is one person who, again, will surely be killed if the trolley goes that way. So you have a choice to make: if you do nothing, five people will surely die, but it's not directly your fault. But if you flip that switch, you can save five lives by killing one, and that person will die through your direct action. And as is usually the case with these sorts of questions, you just have to sort of go with it: for some reason you can't just yell to the people to get out of the way; maybe they're tied down or stuck or something equally improbable that makes for a good ethical dilemma. Nor can you count on luck or anything like that; this is an ethical dilemma so you know for certain what the outcomes will be. So what do you choose? Five deaths that are not your fault, that are an accident and are no one's fault, or one death caused by your action that is your responsibility?

Obviously there's no *good* solution to a problem like that; you have to choose between the lesser of two evils and then justify your choice. If there was a clear solution with no room for argument it wouldn't be a very good ethical dilemma. And fortunately it's also not a very likely scenario since not many of us hang around train yards waiting for out-of-control trolleys to go speeding past. But it's still a very real problem that has very current application. Right now engineers are developing self-driving cars, and they have to decide: if the car's computer has to choose between driving into a crowd versus driving into a couple of people on the sidewalk, how does it choose? If the car has to decide between saving its passengers or saving a larger group of people in another car, how does it choose?

Sometimes we get caught in a dilemma, and we don't feel like there's a truly good option available. If your boss gives you the choice between compromising your integrity or losing your job, what do you decide? If you see a loved one making destructive choices and you're afraid that confrontation will only push them farther away, what do you do? What if showing compassion to those in need and loving your neighbor mean you'll have to sacrifice something for your family; how do you choose? Not every choice in life is a Trolley Problem that will end with someone getting hit by a train, but that doesn't mean that the dilemmas we face in life are unimportant or easy to resolve.

The same is true in the life of faith. The temptation is always to compromise our trust in God's character in one way or another. How much can I really trust God? If I trust Him too much, will He ask me to do something really sacrificial like move to Africa or something weird like dressing funny or giving up something I enjoy? But if I don't trust Him enough, won't He send me to hell when I die? What about God's character: is God loving or is He holy? Is God merciful or is God just? We preach that God loves everyone, but doesn't God also threaten us if we don't meet an impossible standard? Is God good or is God powerful, because if He's really good then why doesn't He do more to fix the world's problems? Is God really worth worshipping? Maybe He is holy and powerful and just, but how can He also be loving and good without compromising somewhere? Don't mercy and love and

goodness require forgiveness, but don't holiness and justice require judgment and punishment? What sort of God do we worship? And therefore, how *should* we worship Him?

Today is the Sunday when many churches tell the story of the baptism of Jesus. There are four Sundays of Advent to start the church year, then there is Christmas to celebrate Jesus' birth, then twelve days later there is Epiphany to celebrate the arrival of the wise men to worship the child Jesus, and then there is the remembrance of Jesus' baptism. It always seems like kind of an odd thing to include in the calendar. Why make such a big deal out of it? Why is Jesus' baptism meaningful enough to tell the story every year? It's certainly not as important as Christmas or Easter. But then you might realize that the baptism of Jesus is one of the events out of Jesus' life that is told in all four of the gospels, which means we ought to take notice of it; not even Jesus' birth is included in all four gospels, and there are relatively few such events. It's also the event that marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry: His life between His birth and His baptism around age thirty is almost entirely a blank for us. But what is it that makes His baptism worth remembering so often that we build it into the calendar for the church's worship? What difference does it make for our daily lives? It might have been a significant moment in Jesus' life, but our worship is something that forms our lives because of the life of God, so how does this moment in Jesus' life intersect with ours?

I've said before that the baptism of Jesus is a theologically complicated event. In other words, there are a lot of things going on here. Lots of promises and stories from the past are being fulfilled and re-told here, and there are lots of implications here for things that are yet to come. If nothing else, Jesus is setting us the example for our own lives of faith, in which we also ought to be marked by the sign of baptism as we enter into God's great work in our lives. But there's one element of this moment in particular that I think helps inform our lives of faith today, because we struggle throughout our lives to resolve dilemmas of action and belief, and the baptism of Jesus cuts through some of those dilemmas.

We've talked recently about John the Baptist, this wild, confrontational figure who preaches in the wilderness and calls people to repentance. The baptism he performed was a baptism of repentance, a physical act that was a sign of commitment to God by turning away from an old life of sin. Baptism or ritual washing was a fairly common practice in that culture and it had a variety of meanings and forms, but it was especially associated with either physical or spiritual cleansing in preparation for worship. John has been preaching about the fact that there is a Messiah coming, one who will winnow the wheat and burn the chaff, who will come in power and will baptize with the Holy Spirit of God and with fire. And suddenly Jesus appears on the scene, and He is the one John has been talking about all along. Jesus comes to be baptized, but John immediately recognizes that here is the one person in the world who has no need of a baptism for repentance. Jesus is God incarnate and therefore doesn't need any spiritual cleansing, and John tries to point that out to Him.

There are two immediate results to the arrival of Jesus on the scene. First, the presence of God provokes a response among the people He is present with by revealing their sinfulness. The presence of a holy God can't help but make sinful people aware of how far removed they are from His holiness. John had already started the process with his preaching; he was doing a pretty good job of pointing out the hypocrisy and the self-righteousness of the people. Even John perceives his own unworthiness when Jesus arrives: "I need to be baptized by you, and do *you* come to *me*?" But this brings us back to our dilemma: if that's what God is like, what hope do we have? If the nearness of

God only serves to show me what a miserable wretch I am, how deep in my sin I am, how far from perfection I am, then why would I want to be near God? God is just going to show me what an awful sinner I am, and even if I'm not that bad of a sinner, I'm still just imperfect and small and insignificant.

But here's the crucial thing: Jesus insists on being baptized because "it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." The one who had no sin nevertheless chooses to identify Himself with sinners even to the point of accepting a baptism of repentance even though He has no need for it. We often talk of the humility required by Jesus to take on human flesh, for God to become one of us and walk among us. We talk of the humility required by Jesus to be willing to be unjustly crucified for our sakes. And that's all true, but that humility is evident throughout His life. When He begins His ministry of teaching and healing, He begins by humbling Himself. He is not ashamed to take the place of a sinner like you or me. So yes, the holy, perfect God comes near to us, but He comes to identify with us, not to condemn us and leave us to die in our darkness. That's how Jesus always works. And if we don't grasp that Jesus came to identify with sinners, we cannot be a part of what He's doing.

The second immediate result is that the humility of God the Son brings an affirmation by God the Father. The Spirit descends as a sign of anointing and empowerment, and a voice is heard from the heavens saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased." That's a consistent theme throughout the life of Jesus, and it's a message for us to receive loud and clear: this is the path of the cross, the path of denying one's self, embracing humility, trusting the faithfulness of God instead of what you own or what you are owed, and then watching as God is indeed faithful in response. The birth as a humble human baby leads to the angels singing *gloria*; the humility of the baptism leads to the affirmation of the Father; the humiliation of the cross leads to the glory of the resurrection. This is the solution to some of those dilemmas we face in life: we choose the path that is faithful to God and shows the most love, the path of the cross, and we wait on God to be faithful.

But more than that, this affirmation by the Father reveals to us, in an oblique way, much about the character of this Messiah, and His character resolves many of our dilemmas. Those words that come out of the heavens have often been taken to be a combination of two Old Testament passages that refer to the Messiah: Psalm 2, which talks about the anointing of the Messiah as king, and Isaiah 42, which talks about the ordination of the Messiah to do God's work. "This is my Son, whom I love" refers back to Psalm 2:7, and "with Him I am well pleased" calls to mind Isaiah 42:1. What's important is to notice the stark contrast in tone between those two passages. In Psalm 2, the Messiah is a bringer of the wrath of God being poured out on the arrogance of the nations; He breaks them with a rod of iron and dashes them to pieces like pottery. In Isaiah 42, the Messiah is one who will not snuff out a smoldering wick, a light for the nations rather than their punisher, one who opens blind eyes and sets prisoners free.

So here in this moment of the baptism of Jesus we catch a glimpse of the solution to our dilemma of faith. What if God is not holy *or* loving; what if God is holy *and* loving? What if God is able to be fully both without contradiction? Here is a God who is so holy that we cannot help but stand naked in our sin, and yet He comes to us and is not ashamed to be identified with us in love. What if God is not just *or* merciful; what if God is just *and* merciful? What if God is great enough to be able to do both at the same time without compromising either? What if God is just not to satisfy His own needs, but because God is for us? "In faithfulness He will bring forth justice," Isaiah tells us; His justice is a function of His love, not a result of anger or spite or vindictiveness.

During Advent, we ache in the darkness as we wait on our Messiah to arrive. At Christmas the light bursts forth in an unexpected way, and then at Epiphany the light shines out into the faraway places to give hope to those in darkness. Today, at the baptism of Jesus, the light comes near to us to reveal our sin, not to condemn us but to identify with us and show us that He is for us.



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