

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

Matthew 3:13-17

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Year A - Baptism of Our Lord, Text: Matthew 3:13-17
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Matthew describes the initial ministry of John the Baptist in 3:1–12. John (dressed like Elijah; compare Matthew 3:4 and 2 Kings 1:8) is the one sent by God to prepare the people for the coming of God’s Messiah. He carries out his mission in the wilderness of Judea (3:1; see also John 1:28), the place of expectations and new beginnings, the place where God said He would take His people to renew them and draw them closer to Himself (Hosea 2:14–15). People from Jerusalem and Judea, and all the region along the Jordan, go out to John and are baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins in the process.

That Jews submitted to John’s baptism is remarkable, for traditionally, only Gentiles were baptized when they converted to Judaism. Furthermore, it would seem that John baptized people in the vicinity where the Israelites first entered the land under Joshua — suggesting that John’s baptism constituted a new beginning, a new entry into the Promised Land for the people of God.

John does not baptize to draw attention to himself. He does so to prepare the way for the One who will follow after him — One who will be much greater than he is. John says that he does not deserve even to perform the most menial task for Him — to untie the thongs of His sandals (a task that only a Gentile slave would perform). John can baptize with water, true! But the One to whom he points will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Imagine! He will bestow the Holy Spirit, not on just a few select ones in the Jewish nation (such as judges, kings, and prophets), but on all who come to Him to receive what He has to give; see Joel 2:28–29. And eventually, the Holy Spirit will come also on the Gentiles (Acts 10:44–48).

Verse 3:13: Jesus, who is living in the northern region of Galilee when John begins his work, heads south so that John might baptize Him also. Jesus does not need baptism for the forgiveness of any sins. He seeks baptism by John to identify Himself with the New Age

that His Father is about to introduce in and through Him. After all, He is the new Son of God. As the old “son” of God, Israel, passed through the waters of the Red Sea and the River Jordan, so also must the new Son of God pass through water — the water of John’s baptism. Jesus will lead His people into the inheritance of an eternal relationship with the Father.

Verses 3:14–15: When John meets with Jesus and hears His request for baptism, he protests. It should be that Jesus baptizes John, not that John baptizes Jesus! But Jesus insists that John should baptize Him, and John relents and carries out the request.

Verse 3:16: When Jesus comes out of the water after His baptism, He sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove (1:10). Centuries before, the prophet had cried out, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down” (Isaiah 64:1). At Jesus’ baptism, the heavens are indeed torn open, and the Spirit comes down in a form that resembles a dove and hovers over the head of Jesus, the new Son of God, the true Israel. (The rabbis, scholars, and teachers often spoke of the dove as a symbol of the nation of Israel; see Hosea 7:11; 9:11; 11:11). Jesus will lead a life directed entirely by the Holy Spirit.

Verse 3:17: At His baptism, Jesus is anointed into the office defined by the voice from heaven: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” The first part of this statement reflects Psalm 2:7, a psalm used in ancient Israel at the anointing and enthronement of a king from the line of David. Its use at Jesus’ baptism declares that God has kept His promise; the line of David will not die out. Jesus is, indeed, the long-awaited descendant of David, the long-expected Messianic King who has come to rule God’s people and empower them to carry out God’s mission to the world.

The direction that the life of this Messianic King will take is different from what many are expecting. “With

you I am well pleased” is a quotation from the first of Isaiah’s Servant Songs (42:1–4; note v. 1). As Messianic King, Jesus will be The Servant. He will be despised, rejected, and His people will do their very worst to Him. They will finally crucify Him! However, through His death He will lavish on them the offer of a complete, perfect, and eternal pardon, and draw them into a relationship with Himself in which they will find true life, now and forever.