

I

This past October, well before sunrise on a Sunday morning, downtown Athens was hopping as over 1,000 runners prepared for the AthHalf, a 13.1 mile race through much of central Athens.

As has become our tradition over the years, we opened the doors of the Atrium and welcomed folks to come inside and stretch and warm up and join us for a pre-race devotional worship service.

The starting line of the half-marathon is across the street there on the other side of City Hall, although I'm not much of a distance runner, after our devotional service concludes, I always enjoy making my way over to the starting line to see all of the runners lined up in the starting pen stretching back down Washington for several blocks. It's inspiring seeing all of them cross the starting line as the crowds cheer them on.

In a long race like that, some folks run very fast. Some run a little slower. Some walk. The runners cross the finish line at very different times, but they all start at the same place, and they start together.

II

And I've wonder – if we think about the life of faith as a long distance race, I think most of us think about the finish line of that race as the day on which we exhale our last breath. As we say in a funeral service, we give thanks

for those who have finished their race and now rest from their labors.

So if our last day is the finish line of a life of faith, where is the starting line? When and where does the life of faith begin? Those kinds of questions are before us in our text this morning from the Gospel of Matthew.

III

This winter and spring, we're reading and preaching our way through the Gospel According to Matthew. We won't be going verse by verse, and we'll even skip a few whole chapters, but we'll be more or less reading Matthew's gospel account straight through.

Those hearty souls who were with us last week on New Years Day will remember that Matthew begins his gospel account with a genealogy, tracing Jesus' family tree for 42 generations, all the way back to Abraham.

Because Matthew, more than any of the other gospel writers, is intent on ensuring that his readers understand that Jesus is not a johnny-come-lately who has no connection to ancient Israel's past. Over the 28 chapters of his gospel account, Matthew uses nearly 300 quotes, paraphrases, allusions, and images from the Old Testament. Jesus is the living fulfillment of the covenant God made with Israel, and nowhere is that theological truth more underscored than in the Gospel of Matthew.

The first readers of Matthew's gospel were most likely born and raised

as faithful, religiously observant first-century Jews. They grown up observing all of the first-century holy days and customs of ancient Judaism, and they would have been deeply familiar with all of the Old Testament references and imagery that Matthew uses throughout his gospel.

And so not for nothing, the very first story that Matthew relates to his readers about the adult Jesus begins on the banks of the Jordan River.

So listen now for a Word from God from Matthew, chapter 3, beginning at the first verse.

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight."'*

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who

warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

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 fulfil 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 is the Word of God for the people of God.

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan.

I had the chance to visit the Land of Promise a few years ago, and as the geology and hydrology of rivers go, the Jordan River is not terribly impressive. It's only about 150 miles long, and in some places at certain times of the year, it looks like more what we would call a creek or even a wet ditch than a river.

But in ancient Israel's memory, the Jordan was not just another body of water. The Jordan has always been a boundary marker, a place that marks the line between what was and what might come to be.

It was the Jordan River over which Moses looked down from Mount Nebo. It was the Jordan River in which Joshua stepped with the ark of the covenant and the people followed behind on dry ground. It was the Jordan River that the prophet Elisha told General Naaman to wash himself of his leprosy.

In the memory and hope of ancient Israel, the Jordan has always been more than just a river. It's been more than just a boundary. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the Jordan River has always been a place of transformation. It's been a place of new beginnings. It's been a place where God has shown up.

When we come to our story today from Matthew's gospel, and John the Baptist appears at the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins, Israel has been under occupation by the Roman army for decades. Rumors of revolt and even

open rebellion against the Romans are everywhere. The land of Israel is a hot cauldron of political turmoil, ready to boil over and explode at any minute.

And so the people of God are on the lookout for the promised Messiah, and they are taking a great interest in the scriptures that speak of a great final battle and the ushering in of the kingdom of God. They are taking a great interest in the scriptures that proclaim that the kingdom of God will come when God's people repent of their sin and return to God's ways.

And so here's this wild figure in John the Baptist, out at the Jordan River, out at the place of transitions and new beginnings, out at the place of Israel's memory and hope. Here he is, proclaiming that the kingdom of God has come near. Here he is, proclaiming that the axe is at the root of the tree and the winnowing fork is at hand. Here he is, proclaiming that things are about to change, and they will never be the same again.

So people from Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region along the river Jordan were going out to him, even the Pharisees and Sadducees and "respectable people."

But what happens next surprises everyone, including John himself. For Jesus comes down from Galilee and presents himself to John to be baptized. And in Ryan's Revised Translation of the Original Greek, John says, "Hold up, Jesus. You've got this backwards. You

don't need to be baptized by me. I need to be baptized by YOU!"

And Jesus kind of pulls a Jedi mind trick on John. Rather cryptically, he says to John, "Let it be so for now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." And I imagine that John just sort of looks puzzled for a moment, shrugs his shoulders, and then he goes ahead and baptizes Jesus.

And when Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens are opened, and the Spirit of God descends on him like a dove and a voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, my beloved, with him I am well pleased."

In Matthew's gospel, when Jesus shows up at the Jordan and presents himself to John, he has yet to utter a single word. He has yet to preach a single sermon, perform a single miracle, to tell a single parable. The baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River is not the culmination of his life's journey, but rather its starting line.

For Jesus, his baptism marks the starting line of a journey that will take him through the wilderness, through the Galilee, into Jerusalem, to cross, to the grave, to the gates of hell itself, and ultimately, to the right hand of God the Father.

But it all starts right here at the Jordan, a place of transitions, a place of transformation, a place of hope, a place where God shows up.

IV

And just as his baptism was the start of Jesus' earthly ministry, for us, baptism is the starting line in the race of faith, the marker of the beginning of new life in Christ.

In our Presbyterian way of being the church, we join with the vast majority of Christians around the world in baptizing infants and children as well as adults.

On our Presbyterian way of being the church, we believe that baptism is far more about God's call and movement in our lives than it is our own. We believe that before we could ever call out the name of Jesus, God called our name.

In our branch of Christianity's family tree, we believe that baptism is a marker of our identity. When we baptize, we are saying that this person's identity in Jesus Christ trumps any other identity that the powers that be in the world might try to assign to him or her. We are saying that this person is a child of God, and with this person God is well pleased, and neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will ever, ever be able to separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus, whose name they now bear.

For us, baptism is not the end of the race of faith. It's not the culmination of a journey, but rather it's the starting line.

My friend, you are never too old and you are never too young to begin this journey. Over the course of my ministry, I've been privileged to administer this sacrament to people ranging in age from three months to 93 years. The invitation to these waters is open to all who put their trust in Jesus Christ as Lord above all else. For anyone who is in Christ is a new creation, the old life has gone, and new life has begun.

And so my friend, if you've never been baptized, or if you don't know or can't remember if you've been baptized, I invite you to talk with me or Leigh after worship today. Let's have a conversation about what it means to be identified as a baptized child of God. For it is never, ever too late to step to the starting blocks on this race of faith.

V

For all of us, it's important for us from time to time to remember the gift of baptism, and for those of us who have been baptized, to renew and recommit ourselves to those promises once again.

In a few moments, we will have an opportunity to reaffirm our baptismal vows. We will once again be invited to repent - to turn from sin and to renounce evil and its power in the world. For that's what repentance means - to turn. We will be invited once again to turn to Jesus Christ and profess him as Lord and Savior, supreme over any other power in the world or claim on our identity. And we will be invited once again to pledge to be Christ's faithful

disciples, obeying his Word and showing his love.

And after we've recommitted ourselves to those ancient baptismal promises, as we go out of this place and into the world today, all of us, baptized or not, are invited to come to these waters, to dip our hands in them, to make the sign of the cross upon our heads, and reminder of the gift baptism.

So come to these waters.

Whether you're a lifelong Presbyterian who can trace your heritage to John Calvin himself, or whether you're not sure you could spell Presbyterian, come to these waters.

Whether you've grown up in this church since you were a twinkle in your mother's eye, or whether this is the first time you've ever set foot in this place, come to these waters.

Whether you've been baptized or not, come to these waters, for this is the starting line in the race of faith. Come to these waters, for this is a place of transformation. Come to these waters, for this is a place of new beginnings. Come to these waters, for this is a place where God shows up.

Thanks be to God. Amen.