

What made the baptism of Jesus so important?

Over the centuries, biblical scholars have argued about this question. We know “repent” was the word John the Baptist used when calling people to be baptized. But what exactly does the “repent” mean? We’ve heard it means “to turn back” or “turn away.” Rather than “feeling sorry for doing bad things” or regret, or confession, the Greek word *metanoia* means: “to go beyond the mind” .. or “to go into the larger mind.”

Cynthia Bourgeault writes that this

“...high teaching” was Jesus’ central message...the kingdom of heaven means reaching beyond black and white into the larger heart and mind of God.” She says instead of -
“change your bad ways”, we hear, “Look! God is inviting us to a new way of seeing, come into the larger mind, and see what God sees.”

To “go beyond the mind” (??), the baptism of Jesus gives us some clues about how we might start to “repent.” What a more perfect, physical symbol of the “larger mind” than the opening of the heavens and God’s spirit descending like a dove?

But what had to happen before this took place? John the Baptist needed to let go of his old ways of seeing the world, as in; “Jesus should baptize *ME*.” ...and make a total reversal of all of his beliefs, as in; “*I* must baptize Jesus.” Something I’m not sure he was prepared for.

In Matthew’s gospel (14), John stopped Jesus from coming forward to be baptized, thinking he was not worthy enough to untie Jesus’ sandals, but in verse 15, he consented....it seems John has gone “beyond the mind.”

Another clue is when we understand *metanoia* (to go beyond the mind), we understand Jesus’ baptism and the contradictory way that it happens. As he does many more times throughout his ministry, the all-powerful Jesus yields to those he brings the gospel to.

His baptism is a rite of passage of sorts, not to cleanse, but to personify/embodiment the upside-down way he will liberate humanity from the ‘bondage of sin’ (a common phrase), or small-thinking. Jesus’ baptism was for him, and for all humanity, a moment when the very nature of everything changed forever.

The book of Matthew says John resisted change, but very quickly Jesus called him to change his old ways of thinking, (3:15) It must have been hard for John to change his entire belief system. He had grown up believing that a powerful Messiah was coming to bring peace on earth. But in the meantime, he would baptize the people with water, telling them someone was coming soon to baptize them with so much more. And then he sees his cousin standing among the group of people waiting to be baptized. When he sees Jesus, he knows for sure he should be baptized by him, but then he hears Jesus saying to him, “No, you are to baptize Me.”

When I was a youth leader at South Arm, I lead several groups of 14-17 year olds through Confirmation classes,...an opportunity for study, reflection and decision-making. The question asked at the end of the classes was always the same, “Do you want to confirm your baptismal vows?” The choice was up to the individual youth. Most of the time the answer was Yes. During the confirmation service, we heard vows that the youth had written themselves. But then often we didn’t see these young people again, or only occasionally. What happened? The young people were, for the most part, very serious about the classes. Maybe the baptism “didn’t take”? Maybe they, and their parents, thought they were “all done?” Did they believe that Baptism and Confirmation were the culmination of their faith? As with everything with Jesus, we know baptism is the beginning. It’s his commissioning and sending out to do the ministry for which he was created. His identity grew and changed throughout his life, beginning from the moment of baptism. His identity was not only about himself as a person, but much more about his *purpose*, his purpose for us.