

Jesus Takes the Stage

Hespeler, January 11, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Baptism of the Lord, First Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 42:1-9, Psalm 29, Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 3:13-17

If you read through the Bible from beginning to end. You will come to a moment when you turn a very significant page. You have just finished the prophecies of Malachi, and you flip over and there you see it, the first page of the New Testament.

And the very important job of opening the New Testament has been given to the Gospel of Matthew. This is not because it was the first book written. Many of the letters and at least one of the other gospels were written first.

But the church decided that Matthew had to come first so that it could be the one to introduce the all-important new main character of the Bible: Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus had been prefigured and prophesied in the Old Testament. But in the New, Matthew gets to finally bring this central character on stage. And Matthew absolutely rises to this task.

Matthew So Far

Over the past few weeks, we have read together the entire text of the Gospel of Matthew up to the passage we read this morning. And if you have followed along, you have already learned so much that is so important about this Jesus.

You have learned from his genealogy that he is descended from a line of kings and so is the rightful heir of the kingdom of Israel. You have learned that he was born of a virgin and that his birth means that God is with us.

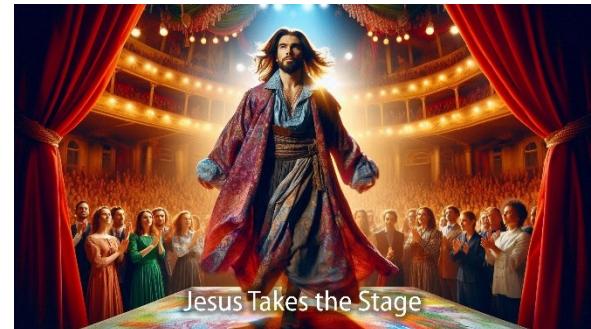
You have also learned that he was recognized as king and honoured by foreign Magi, but that he was feared by the ruler of his own people, who attempted to kill him as a child. You learned that he was a refugee in Egypt who then found asylum in Nazareth of Galilee.

Main Character Hasn't Done Anything Yet

Those are all vital things to know about Jesus. They are central to the Christian understanding of him. But I want you to note something. We have learned all of this without Jesus actually appearing in the story.

Apart from a brief note about him being born (which I guess you can't avoid mentioning), Jesus has done absolutely nothing up until this point in the New Testament. He had been offstage. It has been all about what other people have done. It has all been character background, but the character himself has not yet appeared.

And that makes what happens in this passage we read this morning so important. In this passage, Jesus finally emerges onto the scene. After hearing all these things about Jesus, we finally meet the man. We have his first action and, even more important, his first words.



First Words

And you should always pay close attention to the first words of a new character. In fact, I believe that Matthew is such an extraordinary writer that he goes out of his way to pack everything we need to know about Jesus into Jesus' very first line.

So, what is the first thing that Jesus does in the Bible? **"Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him."** So, Jesus' first act is to choose to be baptized by John.

And right there, actually, we have a problem. In fact, of all of the things that Jesus ever did, this first act proved to be one of the most controversial for the church.

Problems With the Baptism

Surely you can see the problems with this. For one thing, Jesus being baptized by John suggests that he is John's disciple. And if Jesus was the disciple, well, then John was the master. In other words, John was somehow greater than Jesus, at least for a time.

In addition, John declared that his baptism was for the forgiveness of sin. So, Jesus being baptized suggests that he had sin that needed forgiving.

Well, the early church had major problems with both of those ideas. And so, they had a deep discomfort with this first act of Jesus, even though they could not deny that it had happened.

Problem Addressed

And we can see that discomfort in this passage we read this morning, can't we? When John the Baptist says to Jesus, **"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"** he is not just speaking for himself. He is speaking for the gospel writer and also for many other believers who have struggled with this incident.

But all of that controversy is merely setting the stage for the main event in this passage: Jesus' first words. How will he diffuse all of the tension surrounding his first act? Well, despite all the buildup, Jesus doesn't disappoint.

"But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.'" And let's focus on that very important answer and what it means.

The Simple Response

First of all, these words diffuse the problems surrounding Jesus' baptism by John. Jesus essentially agrees with John (and Matthew and most Christian theology) that he doesn't need to be baptized by John. He is clearly not subservient to John, and he has done nothing that needs forgiveness.

That is the most basic meaning of what Jesus says. In the Good News Bible, which Jean read for us this morning and which tries to keep the language as simple as possible, this verse is translated as, **"Let it be so for now. For in this way we shall do all that God requires."**

And that is the essential meaning of Jesus' reply. He is saying that he is simply checking off a box on his to-do list. He is like a student who takes a required course, not because he expects to learn anything from the professor, but simply because the course is required to get the degree. He is an actor who is simply following a script.

So yes, on a basic level, Jesus is saying, "Okay, John, you know I don't need this, and I know I don't need this, but we're going to do it anyway because the boss says so."

The Complex Response

But as I said, the Good News Translation does go for the simplest and most straightforward interpretation. But the fact remains that Matthew did not write it quite as simply as that. In fact, the words that he chooses are not the words that you would normally choose to say such a thing, and that is surely not something that happened by accident.

Matthew is packing a bunch of keywords into this line, and he is doing it on purpose so that we, the readers, can understand exactly why it is that Jesus has shown up on the scene at this moment. So, let's break down this line and try to understand what it is telling us about who Jesus is.

Let It Be So

Jesus doesn't start by saying, "Let's get this over with," or "Let's fulfill the expectation." He says, "**Let it be so now.**" This is central to Matthew's entire project of writing this Gospel. He is letting us know that his story is not just about a bunch of things that were done and said so many years ago. He is telling us that every act of Jesus may have happened in a particular moment, but the "now" of Jesus' actions was always connected to his being.

His baptism, in other words, is not just a one-time event. It is about Jesus' very being. It is about him inhabiting the whole of humanity, including what it means to be a disciple and in need of forgiveness. Yes, Jesus may not have sinned, but he chose to enter completely into the human condition.

Fulfilling

Jesus goes on to say, "**for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.**" And that word, fulfill, is a key word for the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew is the one who constantly tells us that Jesus spent all his time going around fulfilling things.

And what Jesus usually fulfills, as far as Matthew is concerned, is prophecy. Again and again, he tells us that this happened or Jesus did that in order to *fulfill* some Old Testament prophecy, which he then goes on to quote. Only Matthew does this, and he does it all the time.

And, since he usually says it in relation to some prophecy, it might be easy to assume that all he means is that somebody predicted something and then Jesus went and did that thing. But this verse makes it clear that it is a little bit more complicated than that.

The word he uses literally means to fill something up, like when you fill a cup with wine or a swimming pool with water. So, what Matthew is literally saying is that Jesus was going around and filling up holes and vessels.

Prophets and Prophecies

Old Testament prophets were not generally in the business of making predictions. Their task was to speak the Word of the Lord to people in their own time. But that kind of speech created holes – gaps between what God required and what the people actually did. When prophets did speak of the future, it was to outline the consequences that came from those gaps.

What Matthew is saying, therefore, when he says that Jesus fulfilled these prophecies, is that Jesus filled up that gap. Jesus, with his words, his acts and his ultimate sacrifice on the cross, filled up all of those holes that were between us and God. Jesus bridged the gap between God's expectations and our abilities.

Fulfilling Righteousness

But, of course, in this verse, Jesus isn't talking about fulfilling some prophecy. He is fulfilling something else: righteousness. On one level, that is a way of saying, "I need to do the *right* thing," but it also means so much more than that.

Righteousness is the key thing that God seeks from humanity. God wants us to live in the right ways. The word also refers to justice. So when God asks for righteousness, it also means that God is requiring us to act justly, to create justice in the world and to destroy all systems that treat people unjustly or unfairly. God's request for righteousness is a big ask.

The Gaps We Leave

And the problem is that we don't manage to live up to that requirement. We fall into greed and oppression. We participate in systems that treat people unfairly. We misjudge, act cruelly, and sometimes we just fail to do the right thing.

Oh, we try. Some of us try very hard, but we are always going to fall short somewhere. There are gaps between what God requires and what we can do. There are even gaps between our best intentions and what we actually manage to do.

So, what is Jesus saying when he says that it is proper for him to fulfill righteousness? He is saying that he has come to fill those gaps between what God requires and what we can do. Jesus has come to make us acceptable before God despite those shortcomings.

Jesus Fills the Gaps

And here Jesus is saying specifically that being baptized by John is filling that gap. John's baptism, as I said, was for repentance and the forgiveness of sin. But Jesus and John have apparently already agreed that Jesus requires neither repentance nor forgiveness.

And so, Jesus is declaring that he will do it anyway in order to enter fully into the human condition that made us require such things. The forgiveness obtained from his baptism doesn't go to him, therefore, because he doesn't need it. It is obtained for the sake of others – for the sake of you and me.

First Words Matter

But remember what I said about the importance of these being Jesus' first words in the entire New Testament. This means that this is not just about Jesus' baptism. Matthew has gone out of his way to make these first words of Jesus communicate to us that this is what the entire life and work of Jesus will be about.

Everything that Jesus will do, therefore, all of his words and his deeds, will be about fulfilling God's call for righteousness and justice for our sake. In these opening words, we have the whole message of the Gospel.

We have fallen short. We have left that gap between God's requirements and our shortcomings.

But Jesus has come to fill those gaps with his obedience, his grace and his unmatched demonstration of the love of God. Hallelujah, and thanks be to God for such love made real before our eyes.

It is all there, right in the first line. Not bad for an introduction to a pivotal character.