

# Lower Is Higher

Vienna Presbyterian Church  
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James  
Matthew 3:13-17

January 3, 2016



I'm nostalgic on the first Sunday of every New Year. Tell me some of you can relate to what I'm saying. I really enjoy Christmas. I find the tradition of singing carols and Christ-mas Eve candlelight as second to none. I enjoy preaching to the crowds: a full house at our Glorious Sounds music concert and 3500 people Christmas Eve.

I also relish the week between Christmas and the New Year. With no evening commitments and lots of down time, what's not to like about it?

Now it's time to face the music. Christmas 2015 is officially in the books. Life begins in earnest once again. It's back to work, back to school, back to everything.

The Christmas crowds have gone home. They won't be back until Easter.

I invited our guests at Christmas to worship with us this year. Some of you have taken me up on this offer. I commend your willingness to begin a faith journey or deepen your life with Christ in this New Year.

We'll be preaching for the next three months on the most famous sermon ever preached. It's called the Sermon on the Mount and is recorded for us in Matthew 5-7. If you want to discover what Jesus considers important, this Sermon on the Mount is bedrock Jesus.

We've entitled this sermon series "The Good Life." We invest all manner of time and money into pursuing the good life. Don't be fooled into thinking that the good life is about feeling good, looking good and having lots of stuff. Jesus, in

his most famous sermon, challenges every notion of what constitutes the good life.

Before we begin these 12 sermons, there are two seminal events in Jesus' life that serve as an appropriate prelude to his ministry: his baptism and subsequent temptation in the wilderness. Since I can hardly do justice to both events in a single sermon, I've decided to concentrate on Jesus' baptism. His baptism represents a real turning point between Jesus' private life and his public ministry.

Matthew reports that “Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John” (3:13). Galilee includes the region of Jesus' hometown called



Nazareth, a town so insignificant that it warrants no mention in the Old Testament. Jesus has made his living as a carpenter, a trade learned from his father Joseph. Since Joseph is never mentioned in Jesus' adult life, scholars assume Joseph has died by this time in the story. Jesus travels some 70 miles to the Jordan River. The stress here is on the words “to be baptized by John.” Jesus has come for the expressed purpose of being baptized by his cousin John.

John's mission is to prepare people for the coming Messiah. John calls people to repentance, which is symbolized in the act of baptism. That's where John gets his name: John the Baptist.

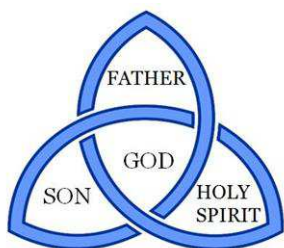
John initially balks at Jesus' request to be baptized. “I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not *you*” (3:14). Jesus hasn't done anything to warrant repentance and his need for baptism.

Jesus insists on going ahead with his baptism. His rationale seems cryptic: “Let it be so, it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness” (3:15). What does Jesus mean “to fulfill all righteousness?” I’m helped by the Good News Bible translation of this verse: “Do it this time, for in this way we shall do all that God requires.” In other words, Jesus is willing to do whatever it takes to fulfill God’s mission. It doesn’t matter to him that the inferior one (John) is baptizing the superior one (Jesus). Doing God’s will is the only thing that matters to Jesus.

John reluctantly agrees to baptize Jesus. In this decisive moment, “Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming on him” (3:16). Whether the dove is a vision or an actual sighting is unclear from Matthew’s account of the text. This dove is accompanied by a voice from heaven: “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased” (3:17). Whether other people hear the voice is also uncertain. One thing is certain. Jesus hears the voice loud and clear.

Three things strike me about this descending dove and voice from heaven

First, all three members of the Trinity are referenced at Jesus’ baptism. God the Father speaks. Jesus the Son listens. The Holy Spirit descends like a dove. Each member of the Trinity plays a decisive role in this baptism story.



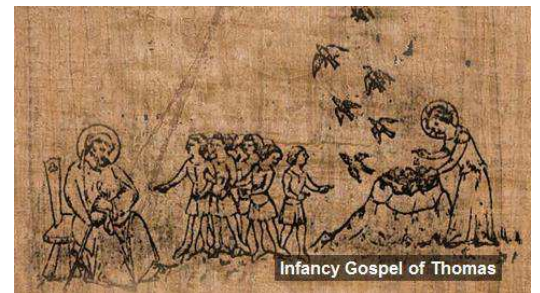
We join with the church through the ages in affirming one God known to us in three “persons” or roles. If you find the Trinity to be confusing, look at it this way. I am one person who has three distinct roles. I am a husband to Chris, a father to Andrew and Emily and a grandfather to Luke, Wesley, Michael and Ainsley. While I perform these three roles, I remain one



person. In like fashion, even though God has three distinct roles, God is still one.

The second thing that strikes me about this descending dove and voice from heaven is that it serves as a clarifying event in Jesus' life. Did Jesus know from an early age that he was the Messiah or did he come to this awareness over time? The Apocryphal gospels certainly teach that Jesus knew he was divine from his early childhood. (The Apocryphal gospels were considered heretical by the early church and excluded in the final canon of Scripture). Take the so-called Infancy Gospels, which attempt to fill in the gaps of Jesus' early life. As a five-year-old, Jesus fashions 12 sparrows out of soft clay to confound his parents and dazzle his play-mates. He also raises his friend Zeno from the dead and miraculously alters boards to fit the bed his father is making in his carpentry shop.

Jesus is not portrayed as a wonder boy in the New Testament gospels. These four gospels are remarkably restrained about Jesus' early life. In fact, there is one story that survives



about the first 30 years of Jesus' life. Rather, Jesus' sense of divine mission grows naturally over time. God uses the normal course of events in Jesus' life to reveal his Messianic mission, such as we have displayed in Jesus' baptism.

The third thing that strikes me about this descending dove and voice from heaven is what it says to families and, particularly, parents. God, the Father, announces to Jesus, the Son, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." These words are spoken before Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount or performed any miracles. The Son has done nothing yet to earn the Father's love.

Do you know how many children ache to hear affirming words from their parents? I've met people well into adulthood who still seek parental affirmation. We praise children for their accomplishments in the classroom or on the field of play. Children need to know they are loved for who they are, not merely for what they do. God has provided us an essential lesson in good parenting. Parents, speak such words over your children—"You are my beloved son or daughter in whom I am well pleased."

So, what does Jesus' baptism have to do with my life? Two observations come to mind. First, Jesus' baptism represents his solidarity with sinners like us. Let's be clear, Jesus is not baptized for his sins. Scripture states unambiguously that Jesus is the only one who lived a sinless life. He is therefore uniquely qualified as the flawless one to atone for our sins.



Let me harken back to a point I made last year. At the cross, justice and mercy meet together as one. There is justice for human sin and Jesus is the one who pays the penalty. But there is also grace offered to sinners like us. What an ingenious solution to the problem posed by human sin. At the cross, there is justice for our sins and grace to us as sinners. If you have never said yes to God's gracious offer of salvation through Jesus Christ, I invite you to do so.

Second, Jesus' baptism provides a practical tutorial on what it means to follow him. The superior one (Jesus) is baptized by the inferior one (John). Here the greater one submits to the lesser one. Jesus taught his followers, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever want to be first must be a slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-45).

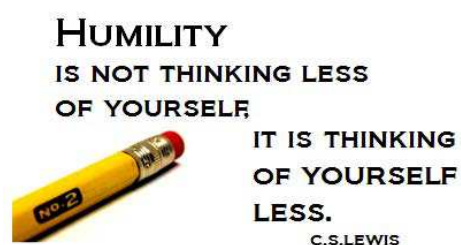
Jesus' servant posture is antithetical to what the world values. We want the superior position. We want to be number one. We want the seat of honor. We want to be right.

Chickens operate by means of a pecking order. This social hierarchy determines which chickens function as top chickens, which ones are at the bottom of the pecking order and where the other chickens fit in-between. The highest ranking chickens get to choose where they will roost and have access to the best food.

Chickens aren't the only ones who operate by a pecking order. We like to rank everything. Take college football; right now all the hype is about who will win the national championship. Will it be Clemson or Alabama? Why is it so important for us to establish who is number one?

What could this mean for your marriage, family or employment for you to assume a lower position? We want desperately to be right. We always want the last word.

Sometimes it's better to be number two. What is it that C.S. Lewis said about humility?  
"Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less."



Jesus is the ultimate number one, yet he is content to assume a lower position. Let's take our lead from Jesus. Lower is higher in the kingdom of God.