

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,  
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, January 19, 2014**

**THREE REVEALED**

**Matthew 3:13-17**

We don't know where Jesus was baptized, except that it was in the Jordan River. Today there are at least three sites that contend for the honor of being THE place where Jesus went into the water. The first is at an archaeological site called Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan, which is Israeli government speak for "We don't control this one, the Jordanians do." It also has a government acronym that is unpronounceable but which is translated, "No water, no tourists." Then, the second site is *Qasr al Yahud*, which is Arabic for "Tell the Christians it was here. They'll believe anything." Interesting thing about this site, that's the Israeli site on the bottom of the screen. There's a Jordanian site right across the river. And the Jordanians are quite emphatic that it was on *that* side of the river that He was baptized, not the lower side. Then there is a third site and that is at a place called *Yar Denit*, which is Hebrew for, "Of course, it's the real site. Would we lie to tourists?" Of whom there are quite a few. Of course, this is the same country where there's a hotel in Jerusalem that has a plaque near the front door that says, "Moses slept here." What they don't tell you is that it was Moses Mendlebaum, a wholesale jeweler from Cleveland, but the tourists don't tend to ask about stuff like that.

Anyway, I happen to know that *Yar Denit* is the real site because that's the one I've been to. Not only did I go to that site, but I've actually baptized two people there. A marvelous, marvelous experience, truth be told. The first time I went there it was October, 1995, and I led a group from Calvary Moravian Church in Winston-Salem to the Holy Land. One of the people who went, went for the specific purpose of being baptized. It was a strange kind of thing. Her name was Erlene and she was around 60 years old and she had been a member of Calvary for decades. But at some point she discovered there had been a foul-up in her membership records. She'd been raised in a Baptist church and when she got married at Calvary they simply made her a member, assuming that since she was an adult she must have professed faith in Christ at her Baptist church at some point, only to find out that she had never professed faith in Christ and never been baptized. So she was a member for forty-some years and at that point she decided it was time to go ahead and get it done. So she decided this was the perfect place.

We came there and there's a small building where a variety of Holy Land trinkets are sold and they will rent you robes for five dollars. There's a reason why they love tourists in Israel. They will spend money on virtually anything, and that included me. Erlene and I both rented robes and we went to the changing areas within the same building, then we came down the steps and into the pool. She came down and she faced the steps. I was facing in the other direction when I suddenly heard a voice from the sky. It was odd, because the voice was speaking Japanese. Then out of the corner of my eye, I saw something white, like a dove coming down and it turned out to be somebody flapping their arms. He was also Japanese. So I realized we have an audience for this. Dozens of people up there looking at what's going on down here and taking pictures so they could

go home to Tokyo and ask one another, “Who are these people?” I had no idea whether any of them might speak English so I took the opportunity to not just simply baptize Erlene, but I gave a short gospel presentation. Hopefully some folks had seeds planted in them that day that later bore fruit for the Kingdom. I proceeded then to take Erlene by the back of the head and lower her down and baptize her in the waters of the Jordan. When she came up she had a smile that could only be called beatific. It was genuinely one of the highlights of my ministry, to be able to baptize a person in the same river if not in the same place where Jesus was baptized. And while the voice and the flapping arm aren’t quite the same as the voice of God and the dove, nevertheless a kind of revelation took place there – a revelation that even now 2,000 years later God is still at work in His people and yes, even in this war-torn place.

Well, the baptism of Jesus, regardless of where on the river it took place, was also an act of revelation and what was revealed there that day was the Holy Trinity. It’s not to say that the people there necessarily knew that. I’ll get back to that in just a moment, but it is to say that something extraordinary happened there. Verse 13 tells us that Jesus came from Galilee where He had been living at Nazareth and He came to John. John the Baptizer was a man who was very much in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets and he was baptizing people specifically for the forgiveness of sins. That’s one reason why over the centuries people have been puzzled as to why Jesus had to be baptized. He had no sin to be forgiven. And John, no doubt, was puzzled by that because we’re told in verse 14 that John tried to deter Him saying, “I need to be baptized by you [a recognition of his own sinfulness even as the baptizer] and do you come to me?” Jesus’ response was straight and to the point: “Let it be so now.” In other words, “Let’s do this. We need to do this and we need to do this because we need to fulfill all righteousness.” It’s not that Jesus Himself had any sin to be forgiven. This was in a manner of speaking a foreshadowing of what was to come. One day, three years down the road, the sin of the world would be placed on His shoulders. He was the One who had been sent into the world to deal with the sin that John was even now seeking to wash away with water. Jesus knew that more than that was needed. Water was fine, but what was needed even more was the work of the Holy Spirit in cleansing the heart and mind and total life of those who would follow Jesus.

So He went to John in order to fulfill the righteousness that was to come to each of us. Another way to put this would be to fulfill the Law, because that’s also something that later in Matthew at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount was part of what He was here to do: To fulfill the Law, not to abolish it. So He goes into the water and He’s baptized and He comes out. He was undoubtedly baptized by immersion and that, too, is a picture, as the Apostle Paul picks up on later in his letter to the Romans. The baptism that people experience at the River Jordan even today is not sprinkling. There’s nothing wrong with sprinkling, but at that spot everyone is immersed because everyone wants to first, replicate what we believe and know Jesus did, but they also want to do what Paul describes as “offering a picture of death and resurrection, burial and rebirth.” So they go down into the water even as Jesus went down into the water to symbolize that He would one day be crucified and would then triumph over death.

Then is when the Trinity revealed itself. At that moment, as Jesus came up out of the water He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on Him. This is one of the places in Scripture where we get the picture of the Holy Spirit as a dove. It doesn't mean that He was actually a bird. It means that that is a form in which He was made visible, in the same way that the Second Person of the Trinity – *Logos*, the Son of God, God the Son – was made visible in the incarnate person of Jesus. Here we get a picture of the Spirit descending not just upon Jesus, but upon the water and there's an Old Testament allusion there. A couple of them, in fact. You'll remember in the very first chapter of the Bible, in Genesis, we're told that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was without form and void, and the Spirit of God was upon the face of the deep. It wasn't a coincidence. There are no coincidences with God, no coincidence that the Spirit comes upon Jesus as He is coming out of the waters. Once again the Spirit comes to the waters. This reference to the dove also suggests the picture of Noah and the dove that was sent out and found land and discovered that the flood was over and was a picture of the promise that God had given that He never again would destroy humanity. That dove, the Spirit of God, came to rest upon Jesus. Then we have the third member of the Trinity in verse 17: "And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, [implying that if this is my Son, then the voice must be the father] whom I love. With Him I am well-pleased.'" Good divine housekeeping stamp of approval set on Him in a way that could not be missed by those who heard it that day. "This is my Son. This is the One whom I have sent." That's not to say that He hadn't been God's Son before. This is not a statement of adoption. This is a statement that this is God's own Son, always has been His Son. "This is the One whom I love, the One whom I have sent to carry out my mission."

I am not suggesting here that everyone who heard the voice or saw the dove immediately thought, "Oh, that's what the Nicene Creed is going to say 300 years from now!" This is not a picture of a fully-developed theology of the person of God in the Trinity. What this is like is more what we see in the Christmas story. You remember what Luke said about Mary, how she heard the angels with their proclamation and she received the shepherds. Luke writes in chapter 2, verse 19: "Mary treasured up all these things that had happened from her conception to her delivery and pondered them in her heart." For the next 33 years Mary would have thought about the events leading up to and including the birth of Jesus. And after the crucifixion and after the resurrection she undoubtedly would have been able to look back on those events and understand them far better than she did at the time.

In the same way, here at the Jordan River, the onlookers didn't see the dove and hear the voice and say, "Oh, the Trinity has revealed itself." No Jew would have thought like that, not at that point. It wasn't until after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ that His followers began to realize there was a lot more going on here than even we realize. What were the names that they had for Him before the end of His life: Master, Teacher, Rabbi. They might even have called Him *Lord* but would only have meant that in the sense of one in a hierarchy over them, one with authority to whose authority they bowed. They would not have referred to Him as *Lord* in the way that we do. When we use the word *Lord* we essentially mean *God*. It was only afterwards, it was only in the light of the end

of the story that they were able to understand the various parts of the story as they had seen it unfold: the birth, ministry, healings, beatings, exorcisms, and yes, baptism. But the Trinity was revealed here at the beginning of His public ministry so that those who walked with Him for the next three years would know that He wasn't just making this stuff up as He went along. That God was behind Him. This was not some Lone Ranger teacher. This was not a guy just trying to make a case or an argument. This was certainly not a charismatic charlatan whose sole purpose was to put together a collection of followers who would enable him to live in a style that people of that time could only dream of and yes, there are people who claim that's exactly what was going on, though they don't think that He's a charlatan. They think He was the first Word of Faith preacher. That's not what was going on. What was going on here at the beginning was that those who were there that day and those who would hear the story later – Matthew was one of the – would know that what was going on is God had sent His own Son into the world, that He loved Him, that He approved of Him, and, as Luke puts in his version, they were to listen to Him.

Almost everybody here, I think, has been baptized. And when you were, the chances are very good that whoever baptized you pronounced over you these words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." They didn't do that because it sounded good. It has a certain cadence to it, right? It sounds good. It certainly sounds better to the ear than: "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer." That's what some churches use these days. That just somehow sounds clumsy. "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" sound melodic. But that's not the reason we use that. We use that expression because – and here's good news – the God who spoke from heaven on the day of Jesus' baptism and declared that He loved Him, spoke on the day of our baptism and declared that He loves us. And continues to deliver that message to us on a daily basis. At our baptism God said, "You're not just a bunch of random, atomized, disconnected individuals anymore. You are part of my family." Not only has your status on earth changed but you have become a son or a daughter of God. So we see the Father in our baptism.

We see the Son because it is He who has made possible that change and serves as a model for us for what a member of that household is supposed to look like. He brought it about, of course, through His sinless life, through His sacrificial death, through His triumphant resurrection. He brought it about that the door was open for us not simply to be sprinkled with water, but to be taken into the household of God and become children of God rather than children of the world or children of the devil. He also showed us what that means. You'll remember that one of the things that Jesus called His Father was *Abba*, an Aramaic word that roughly translated means, "Daddy." I don't know about you but I was never able to call my biological father that. There was enough of a barrier between us that it just never seemed right. It never seemed appropriate to do that. I never called my mother "Mommy." But I can call the Creator of the universe "Daddy." I can refer to the One who made me and redeemed me, the One who sent His Son to die for me, I can refer to Him as the closest relative I have in the cosmos, "Daddy." And I can do that because Jesus showed the way, provided the model and opened the door for us to be able to do that.

So we saw the Father at Jesus's baptism and we saw Him at ours. We saw the Son being baptized and at our baptism we stand in His place. And we see the Holy Spirit not only in the dove at Jesus' baptism but in ours as well because as we are adopted into the household of God the Holy Spirit changes us from the inside out. The Holy Spirit makes us a different person and the truth is that it may be difficult but everyone here has a *before* and *after* picture. The transformation question may have taken place when you were so young that you don't even remember it. But you are, if you are a child of God, a different person now than the one who was birthed by your mother. And the reason why you are a different person is because the Holy Spirit has come like a dove and rested upon you and begun the work of transformation that He continues throughout our lifetimes.

Did I see all of that happen the day that I baptized Erlene in the Jordan River? No, I can't say that I did. Have I ever seen that at any baptism that I've conducted? No, not immediately. We don't generally hear voices, we don't generally see the Holy Spirit as a dove when we baptize an infant or a child or an adult. That's generally not what happens. So I ask you this morning to use your divinely transformed imagination to consider this: Next time we have a baptism here and Neil is doing his thing and he's explaining it and he's carrying around the baby and he's putting water on its forehead, listen for the voice of God in that. Hear the Father telling that child, "From henceforth you shall call Me Daddy." Try to see the Holy Spirit at work. The Holy Spirit coming down and saying, "This one is now mine. Satan, you can't have this one anymore. Yes this one will make mistakes. Yes, this one will sin. Yes, this one may even walk afar off at times, but this one is Mine and I'm going to act in this one's life at every moment of their earthly life. Whether that child realizes it or not, that's what I'm going to do."

Having pictured that in a baptism what I would ask you to do now is what Martin Luther did. Martin Luther used to be asked what authority he had to do the stuff that he was doing. As he opposed the papacy, as he sought to bring reformation to the church, as he sought to restore the gospel to its central place in the life of the people of God, he was asked by what authority he did that. His answer was not, "I'm ordained as a priest." His answer was not, "I've got a doctoral degree." Though both of those things were true. His answer was, "I am baptized." And that means that God is even now working, showing Himself to me, leading me to all truth, He is opening my eyes to what some have been blinded to. He has enabled me to see Scripture in a way that not very many people have in recent years. You don't have to start a reformation. Instead, what you can do is go to work tomorrow and as you sit at a desk in Washington, remind yourself, "I'm not just an animal in a cube farm. I'm baptized. I am a child of the King." As you go to school tomorrow and as you teach children who don't want to learn and deal with colleagues who don't seem to care – which unfortunately is the lot of some teachers – I'd ask you to go and do that and instead of dwelling on what's bad about the job, instead remind yourself that "I am baptized, which means that God is at work in me and through me to influence the lives of my colleagues and my students." As you speak to your spouse later today or through the rest of the week, remind yourself, he or she is baptized. He or she is a child of God. He or she should be treated as a member of "Dad's family." It's a little

different from just treating him or her as a spouse. It's treating him or her like you really take your in-laws seriously. In any aspect of our lives – work, play, relationships, parenting, child-rearing, dealing with our finances – the answer is always the same. Like Jesus, we have been baptized and we have fulfilled all righteousness. We have become children of God and everything that we say and do and are can reflect that fact.