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“FIRST THINGS FIRST”

Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

It is good to have cousins. As I was growing-up I visited cousins Earl and Betty, Andy and Sally. I rode my bike over to their home and we played games and had adventures. Their family hosted big family picnics for they had built a picnic shelter in their back yard and there were swings and horseshoes and a tennis court. In winter we went sledding together.

We attended different schools. Different churches. We had different friends. We went to different colleges ... and we went our separate ways. But every couple of years we would have a Family Reunion and be together with cousins and second cousins...a growing family. And we caught-up with what was going on in each-other's lives.

You don't have to be together often in order to be connected with cousins ... with aunts and uncles ... they're family.

I was envious of Earl and Andy. Especially Earl. He danced. I mean, truly danced. So when there was a big dance. Like the annual DeMolay dance that drew together youth from many Harrisburg-area schools ... when the music ... when the beat was just right, cousin Earl and his girlfriend got into it ... and others would back-off to the edges of the dance floor and Earl and his partner would do their thing. It was all quite impressive. I watched in awe.

Cousin Earl's a medical doctor. He's still practicing in Albany, New York. I haven't seen him for over 7 years, but I know this ... if he walked in here today – if our paths crossed in these days, I would immediately recognize him, and we would take-up conversation where we had left off. I can even see him in my mind's eye.

Well, I've probably gone on too long about cousins ... the affinity among cousins. It's not necessarily accurate in all cases ... but in many cases, there is a deep bond.

Cousin John, the one who preached and baptized in the wilderness down along the Jordan River ... and Jesus, the one who came to be called “Messiah” ... were cousins ... second cousins. Their mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, were cousins. And

they must have been quite close for when Mary and Elizabeth were pregnant Mary went to spend three months with Elizabeth. Elizabeth was further along in her pregnancy by several months.

During Mary's visit, as they compared stories, Elizabeth told how Zechariah, her husband had been visited by an angel who told him that she would conceive and bear a son. Name him "John" the angel instructed. Zechariah questioned, "But Elizabeth is too old to give birth. "That's simply impossible."

The angel's response, "Just you wait ... trust ... your son will turn the hearts of the disobedient into the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

And Mary's story was similar ... "The angel Gabriel came to me also ... 'Mary, don't be afraid, you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David."

"Your son will be great and of his kingdom there will be no end." How will this be? Mary questioned. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, therefore the child will be called Holy ... the son of God. "Nothing is impossible with God."

And Elizabeth and Mary spent those three months, rejoicing ... excited ... they sang ... Mary sang ...

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in God my savior.
For he has looked with favor upon the lowliness
Of his servant."

And certainly they cooked and laughed
And cried ... and wondered what their
God had in mind for them.

Then – Mary returned home. Shortly thereafter, John was born. Then, several months later ... Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

And then silence – thirty-some years of silence – except for a hurried trip down to Egypt when Jesus was very young, and a trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12 years old. On that trip

Mary and Joseph found Jesus at the Temple teaching the religious leaders. What child is this?

Other than that ... silence in the pages of history. But here is something I surmise, because I know something about cousins and aunts and uncles. John and Jesus got together, just as their mothers had done years earlier.

I doubt that they played horseshoes and I seriously doubt that they went sledding ...but they listened to the stories their mothers told about their wondrous God who had awesome plans for their children and the hopes and dreams that filled their mothers' hearts.

And I believe that John and Jesus talked into the night. And shared their dreams. Their passions. And with hope, they awaited the dawn.

So John and Jesus who met there along the river Jordan were not strangers. They were cousins ... family. Jesus knew something of what was going on with John for he had listened to and watched John grow-up.

Jesus knew John's impatience with the way things were. John was dissatisfied with the status quo ... Jesus knew John wanted radical change. "Repentance" was often on John's lips. Change your way of living ... away with greed ... away with unbridled power ... away with sin. TURN TO GOD'S WAY. Act with justice for all people. Do that which makes for peace ... for harmony.

And also ... John knew Jesus. He knew Jesus's enduring patience, and at times that would almost drive John crazy. Working with his father at the carpenter's shop, Jesus patiently planed and sanded. Studied his work ... and sanded some more. John observed the process ... tried, but patience was not his gift. John simply couldn't get the knack for smoothing-off rough edges.

What especially got John's blood boiling were hypocritical religious leaders. One of his favorite sayings was, "Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not

bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” That kind-of sums-up John.

And John insisted; “One who is more powerful than I is coming after me. “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. And he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

I believe John was referring to cousin Jesus as he preached that dire warning. In his own enthusiasm, however, he failed to recall Jesus awesome patience.

So now John and Jesus meet in the wilderness ... down along the Jordan River. It’s interesting to me that Jesus sought out John, asking to be baptized by John. And that was shocking to John, also.

“Just one minute, Jesus, I need to be baptized by you.
“You’re the greater, here.

“I remember Aunt Mary stories about the angel who told of your birth. And that you be named ‘the Lord saves’ ... JESUS.

I remember Mary telling that the Lord God will give you the throne of David and you will reign forever.

And you will bring the mighty down from their thrones.

And lift-up the lowly ...

and you will fill the hungry with good things.

And your mercy will be forever.

I recall all that from our youth – when late into the night we told our hopes and dreams.

And pieced together ways we could transform the world ... or at least our little slice of the world.

NO ... YOU NEED TO BAPTIZE ME.

”But John – to fulfill all righteousness – that is ... to make everything right perfectly right ... to make it crystal clear

how everything works in God's realm ... "I need to be baptized by you."

Humility is Jesus' hallmark.

In Mark's gospel, as Mark recalls Jesus' baptism, immediately after the voice proclaims Jesus as God's Son, Jesus is thrust into the wilderness...

certainly whatever being God's Son means, it means at least obedience to the will of God ...and finding ourselves cast into strange, challenging, even dangerous locations.

In Matthew's gospel, he uses the word righteous 7 times, to mean an act of human obedience to a divine command. Here ... right here in the beginning of Jesus' ministry Jesus portrays the holy power of obedience.

John is no doubt bewildered ... shaken, perhaps, but agrees ... And Jesus submits himself to John's baptism. And as Jesus comes up from the water, the heavens open and Jesus sees the spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

And these words resonate from the heavens, "This is my Son, my beloved ... listen to him."

And I believe cousin John uttered ... AMEN.

It's an awesome moment of confirmation to a faithful way of living.

HUMBLE AND OBEDIENT.

The stage is now set for three years of Jesus' public ministry. And time and time again we are going to see Jesus assume this humble, unpretentious and obedient role.

And there is no higher, more effective power!

And you and I are to obediently and joyfully play our bit parts in righteousness, and to do so from love rather than from grudging compliance to commands. When Jesus calls us as his followers, it's as if he is saying, "I've enjoyed obedience to

God's call. NOW YOU – Pastor Bob – you ruling elders ...
deacons ... members ... YOU TRY IT.

And finally, in celebration of a life well lived ... a life which has
had glorious consequences through time – and beyond; the
apostle Paul writes to followers in Philippi – and he writes to us
too ... here at Head of Christiana:

*Have this mind among you which was also in Christ
Jesus. Who, though he was in the form of God did not
count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but
humbled himself and became obedient to the point of
death. Even to death on a cross.*

*Therefore God has highly exalted him. And given him the
name which is above every name. That at the name of
Jesus every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is
Lord to the glory of God the father. (Philippians 2:5-11)*

And may we continue to recognize God's blessing for us, our
church and our world, allowing the grace of Jesus, the Messiah,
to flow through us. Amen.