

Think about something you have waited for ... waited for a long time! Maybe it was a wedding. A cruise. Graduation. A new baby. Can you remember the preparations, the excitement, problems along the way, and how you felt when you finally arrived? With so much invested in “getting there” sometimes the journey overshadows what comes next.

I wonder if John’s followers felt the same way. They had gathered with anticipation and suddenly he said, “The Messiah is here. He is standing in the water with you. I am done, see you later.” After all that buildup, I wonder how many wanted more.

What came next? They had seen what they came to see and experienced what they had waited to feel. Now what? Back to the vineyards, flocks, or other daily routines? Had the anticipation been worth the effort? Would life now be any different?

Now, how about you? How was your journey to Christmas? Did you get what you wanted? Did you want what you got? Were your efforts appreciated, successful, or was this Christmas different than you had planned? I remember as a child the buildup for Christmas, and the let down when the first toy was broken, or it was time to go back to school. We spend so much time anticipating something new, something life changing – and once it arrives, then what?

Luke describes the Baptism of Jesus quite simply. Jesus arrived and then the awaited moment had passed. John had promised, “Wait with me, and you will all see the Messiah.” But to really bring him into your world, you have to “repent!” You can’t keep living as you always have! Like wise men who were told to “go home by a different way, John’s message was the same. “Don’t take the same path you have always taken.”

God’s Holy presence would renew creation by the power of his love. The language of harvest (gathering good grain and burning waste) was clearly understood by the audience. All who join Messiah would become first fruits of a fantastic harvest. Those who reject Messiah would be lost like the waste by-products left after harvest time. Jesus began to pray. During that time the Holy breath of God (the same breath that created at the beginning) took on a visible shape, fluttering, floating, and descending upon Jesus like a gentle dove. (*How in the world is it possible to describe what has never been known or seen?*) Somehow, like the burning bush for Moses or the pillar of fire for Israel in the desert, it was obvious that God was present! Jesus was the “chosen one.” He was favored by God. He and God were ONE!

Who knows what they expected from John? He had set the table, but how could they have known how pleasing and nourishing the meal of this new kingdom would be? Like our Christmas preparations, sometimes the gifts we plan for are not the ones we receive and sometimes the humblest actions become the most valuable gifts of all.

In O. Henry’s famous short story, “the gift of the Magi” a very poor and loving couple, Jim and Della spend what little they had to buy one surprise gift for each other. Della

had no money so sold hair to buy a gold watch chain for Jim's watch. Jim sold his watch to buy beautiful combs for her long hair. Left with nothing but the gift of sacrificial love, each realized their love was the most important gift of all. Their gifts to each other were no less valuable than the precious gifts of the magi to a baby Jesus.

Sometimes we get so wound up with our preparations we forget God's. Trees and lights and wrapped gifts are dramatic, but they fade. God's gifts don't have that issue. We must not miss the point of this day in the life of Jesus! In this moment of baptism, this holy washing of water and spirit, Jesus' role changed from being a carpenter's son to the promised Messiah – known as "God in the flesh." The new kingdom had begun!

His baptism was not about forgiveness or becoming Christian but to tie God to US. Just as an ark gathered the faithful and saved them from extinction, Jesus' jump into the Jordan was God's embrace of all his children. Standing in the water with all who had been gathered by John, Jesus announced it was time NOW to move forward!

And just as Creation gave shape and purpose to chaos, WE are shaped and filled with God's breath of life. God's voice thunders that WE are his children. By standing in our baptismal flood, he makes himself one with us, that we might be one with Him. Later he would immerse himself in our death through a similar life-giving embrace! His journey would end where ours begins, and Christmas reminds us that what comes next is what the journey is all about.

Empowered by that same holy breath, or Holy Spirit, we too have been released from earth's magnetic field. The journey to Christmas is always filled with excitement, but it is not the end but another new beginning. John was more than a prop, but he was not the answer. Our Christmas efforts likewise prepare us for the journey to come. Although trees and lights are being put away, the joy should only continue to grow. How blessed we are to have had another opportunity to stand at the manger and be reminded of how special this journey truly is.

What comes next now that Christmas is over? Where do we go from here? As long as it is with Jesus it will be the place to be! Christmas is never the destination but helps us celebrate a journey that has always just begun!

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