

ADVENT 3, Dec. 17, 2017, Year B

- Last week we considered [the ministry of John the Baptist](#) in relation to a painting by Pieter Brueghel. We noticed how Brueghel' portrayed John's ministry *as if it had occurred in the 16th century*, rather than in the first. I said that, *if I was able to paint a reproduction of it*, I would want to picture John's ministry in contemporary Western Michigan. And, in it, I would depict people just like you among the crowd. Today, I share with you another painting that takes this *same approach*. For it sets John's ministry in mid-twentieth century England. The painting is [Stanley Spencer's work, titled *The Baptism*](#).¹
- Stanley Spencer was gifted at drawing, and produced some stunning examples of realism. Yet, over time, he moved in a more stylistic direction, which featured *symbolic representation* rather than a *literal depiction*. [Here, John is rightly shown on a river bank. But, in this case, it is the River Thames, upstream and west of London, in the village of Cookham, where Spencer lived and painted. This is why](#) we see stone steps, a park bench, and even a diving board in his picture.
- [These and other unexpected elements jump out at us from the painting, and don't appear to fit neatly with the biblical story.](#) The bathers in the scene seem to be *Spencer's neighbors*, enjoying the river on a warm afternoon. They do *not* look like they've come out from the city seeking Baptism. The way they are dressed in old-fashioned bathing suits, rather than in regular clothing, confirms this impression. But [the key here](#), as in so many of Spencer's religious paintings, [is his desire to blur the line between past and present](#). Just as biblical stories were true about things [then](#), long ago, they are also true [now](#), in our present experience.²
- So, we have this image, *which depicts more of a 1952 Thames river scene than it does a first century Jordan River bank.* [How is this painting in any way](#)

faithful to, or provide insight about, our Gospel reading this morning? The answer may surprise you!

- First, as when viewing many paintings, *we need to distinguish between foreground and background*, and explore the relationship between them. Upon first seeing this painting, we *of course* notice John and the figure of Jesus in the foreground. But then, our eyes shift to the many persons in the background ~ to their postures and facial expressions, to where they sit or stand or float. And we notice their physical surroundings. *Rather subtle, but critical to our 'reading' of this painting, is one significant difference between the foreground and background.* Both John and Jesus' hair and beards, as well as John's camel-fur tunic, suggest a *biblical setting*. *Whereas, all the other* figures are portrayed as having *modern* hairstyles and swimming costumes. *This contrast fits with another:* in the foreground we find the *natural* setting of a sandy-pebbly riverbank, upon which John stands, and on which Jesus rests his arm. Yet, in the background, we see the *humanly-constructed* steps, and the wharf-like edge of the opposite riverbank.
- We can take this observation further, in relation to the final words of our Gospel reading. In what seems like *merely an aside*, the writer tells us that, *"this took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was Baptizing."* The key word here is the word *"across."* For *John was on the east, or far, side of the Jordan* relative to those who came out from Jerusalem. But notice *this* detail in Stanley Spencer's painting ~ it appears that all of the persons who have come down to the river on this summer afternoon, have entered the Thames by the steps we see *in the background*. They have stayed on *what was for them the near, and readily-accessible side* of the river.
- In any painting exploring John's Baptism of Jesus, we *expect* the artist to portray that event in the foreground of the picture, just as Spencer does here. (After all, that's what the painting is *about*.) *And yet, notice how—apart*

from us—all the other 'observers' of this occasion are viewing it from behind, and not seeing it from the front.

- Noticing this will help us perceive something significant about the Baptizer's ministry in our Gospel reading. Surely, John had a good reason for baptizing on the far side of the Jordan, rather than on the *nearer* and *more-accessible* side. After all, if you offer folks an opportunity, shouldn't you make it easily available? But did John do *that*? No! In fact, he did the opposite. Why? Because those who came out to John *had to* cross the Jordan, and *literally*, but also *symbolically*, leave the "promised land." Which means that, after encountering John's ministry, they re-entered the promised land. Add to this one more fact: Jews then, and Jews now, do not baptize one another. For Jews are already baptized ~ because they were baptized when their forebears crossed the Red Sea, and their baptismal identity was renewed when the next generation crossed the Jordan River to the Promised Land, forty years later.
- This helps us see *how radical* the Baptizer's ministry really was. He was challenging people who were already sons and daughters of the Covenant, to leave the Promised Land, and be baptized *in the wilderness*. Then, they would enter the Promised Land, *like those entering it for the first time!*
- Spencer's painting can help us grasp an important point. Look at all those faces in the background: they suggest *how it's easy to be complacent* about important things that happen around us! After all, they're just swimming, cooling off on a hot day. The dispassionate quality of these swimmers' faces suggests their *indifference* to the decisive event, which forms the subject of the painting.
- And so, *what would it take* for those casual swimmers to grasp *what is really happening* in the foreground of this painting? They would have to come

over to *this* side of the river. They would have to ascend the bank, *and then turn* ~ in fact, they would need to *turn completely around*. And that is just what the word "repent" signifies ~ to turn around; to re-orient ourselves and our perspective; and, to change how we *see everything*, in relation to *a new reality*.

- Now, *I don't claim* that this was Spencer's *intent* when producing this painting. But surely, *the gift of his vision* helps us notice a *vital* element in our Gospel reading.
- Here is how it can help us: We're usually *more comfortable staying on the near and accessible* side of familiar boundaries like a river. *Stepping into* a river might *merely be recreation*. Crossing a river usually requires commitment, purpose and personal investment. *Also*, observing an event from *behind*, and from *afar*, *does not prevent* our appreciation of it. *But viewing it close-up, and from the front, enables us to participate in it*.
- *Let's go out to John, then*. For *there*, we will find the One toward whom he points. And, *to get there, let's risk crossing the river to the far side, beyond safe and known parameters*. Especially so that we can see *what John helps reveal, face to face*. For *if we do*, and if we 'step out in faith,' we may find that we are able *to begin again*. We can go back into our *familiar* circumstances *with a new spirit, and as if for the first time*. We are now *more likely* to have '*Advent epiphanies*.' And we may *discern the Spirit's presence* in situations where we did not expect to meet God.



Stanley Spencer, *The Baptism*, 1952

John 1:6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." [This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.](#)

Notes:

¹ From Wikipedia: 'Sir Stanley Spencer CBE RA (30 June 1891 - 14 December 1959) was an English painter. Shortly after leaving the [Slade School of Art](#), Spencer became well known for his paintings depicting Biblical scenes occurring as if in [Cookham](#), the small village beside the [River Thames](#) where he was born and spent much of his life. Spencer referred to Cookham as "a village in Heaven" and in his biblical scenes, fellow-villagers are shown as their Gospel counterparts.' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_Spencer)

² For additional examples, see his 1935 *St. Francis and the Birds*, or his 1958 *Crucifixion*, both of which feature contemporary English dwellings and rooftops in the background.