

The Baptism of Our Lord | St. Matthew 3:13-17
February 26, 2017 | Saude & Jerico Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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You, my Lord Jesus, are my righteousness; I am Your sin.
You have taken from me what is mine and have given me what is Yours.
You became what You were not and made me to be what I was not. Amen. (Martin Luther)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for this morning is taken from the third chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, beginning with the thirteenth verse. We read as follows in Jesus' name:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" / But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. / And when Jesus was baptized, immediately He went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on Him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, into whose death we are buried and in whose resurrection we rise to new life through holy baptism, dear fellow redeemed:

Nothing about Jesus' appearance as a child made people think He was the promised Messiah. He was visited by the shepherds the night of His birth, but only because the angels told them where to look. He was praised by Simeon and Anna in the temple, but only because the Holy Spirit brought them to Him. He was worshipped by the wise men, but only because God compelled them to follow the star westward to His home. After spending His earliest years in Bethlehem and in Egypt, He and His family moved to Nazareth in the territory of Galilee, where like all of us, He passed through the stages of adolescence. No one guessed by looking at Him that He was the Messiah, true God and true Man.

While Jesus was living a very ordinary life in Nazareth, a man named John "came preaching in the wilderness of Judea" (Mt. 3:1). He was the only son of a Jewish priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. John was, in a word, strange. He dressed in a strange way, ate strange things, and preached a strange, or rather, unique message. He cried out, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (v. 2). And people actually listened. The evangelist Matthew writes that "Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (vv. 5-6). John told the crowds, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (v. 11).

I

It was at this time that Jesus prepared Himself for a journey some distance to the southwest of Nazareth. I wonder what He told His mother about this trip. Did He say He was going to visit some relatives, of which John the Baptizer was one? Or did He say something like He did as a twelve-year-old, *"I must be about My Father's business"* (Lk. 2:49)? Both of these things would have accurately stated the purpose of the trip. He traveled to the Jordan River where John was preaching and baptizing and asked John to baptize Him. But why? John baptized with water for repentance, and He knew enough about Jesus to wonder why Jesus should require this. *"I need to be baptized by You,"* he said, *"and do You come to me?"*

John knew there was something significant about Jesus, but as he declared later, he did not know until he began his wilderness work that Jesus was the Messiah. He explained that God sent him to baptize with water, so that the Messiah *"might be revealed to Israel"* (Jn. 1:31). God told him that *"He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit"* (v. 33). John did consent to baptize Jesus. When this was done, the heavens opened, the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and the voice of God the Father said, *"This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."*

The time had finally come. Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of His public work. He was now revealed as the Son of God. John wasted no time in pointing Him out as *"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"* (Jn. 1:29). The long-repeated promise of the LORD had come to pass. The Savior was here! Jesus now entered into His three-fold office as Prophet, Priest, and King. As Prophet, He would declare God's truth to any who would listen. As Priest, He would offer up Himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. As King, He would assume the rule over all creation, over the Church, and over all the hosts of heaven—not only as God, but also as Man.

His official anointing into this three-fold office was seen in the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Him in the form of a dove. Isaiah had already prophesied long before that this would take place. He recorded the words of God the Son, who said: *"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor"* (Is. 61:1-2).

On His first trip back to Nazareth after His baptism, Jesus read these exact words in the synagogue. He told the people in His hometown, people who saw Him grow from a young boy into a man, *"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"* (Lk. 4:21). In other words, Jesus told the townspeople that He was the promised Messiah. This offended them. They did not believe that Jesus could be anything other than what they thought Him to be – the son of Joseph and Mary (v. 22). They did not know that something new had begun at His baptism.

II

But something new had begun, and not just for Jesus. What was it that He told John? What reason did He give for being baptized? He said, *"Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."* We all know that Jesus had no sins to wash away in baptism. John perceived this also, which is why he hesitated to baptize Him. So then why did Jesus ask to be baptized? He was not baptized because of *His* sins, of which there were none; He was baptized because of

your sins. He had to fulfill all righteousness for your sake and for all who are unrighteous by nature. You might think of it this way: when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, your sins were poured over Him. Taking that awful load on Himself, He now began the three-year walk to His death to make atonement for that sin.

He did this so that at your baptism, His righteousness would be poured over you. Paul described this great exchange between Jesus and sinners, *"For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"* (2Cor. 5:21). Jesus took on your sin, so that He could endure the wrath of God in your place. He did this willingly. None of us knows what burden Jesus carried as He set out to be baptized by John and begin His public work. None of us knows how much heavier the burden got the closer He came to His crucifixion. But He carried it gladly. He carried the burden of sin for you. He wanted to save you from death. He wanted you to have perfect life with God forever. So He carried on.

We wonder how it is that Jesus could love us in this way. What did He see in us that was worthy of His sacrifice? What had we done, or what would we do, that would convince Him that this was worthwhile? The answer is nothing at all. He considered us worthy not because of anything in us, but simply because He had compassion on us. Nothing we have done or might do, could ever measure up to what He did for us. Jesus saved us by grace alone. His motivation to save us came from His own heart.

This loving disposition toward us is the reason He is gracious and merciful to us today. It is the reason He calls us to the waters of baptism where our new life begins. Jesus says that all who are born, must be born again *"of water and the Spirit"* (Jn. 3:5). Prior to baptism, you are a child of God, but only in the sense of having physical life through Him. By baptism, you become a spiritual child of God and an heir of His heavenly kingdom. Paul told the Christians in Galatia, *"[F]or in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ"* (Gal. 3:26-27). Here God clearly links baptism and faith together. When you were baptized as a baby, you were also brought to faith in Jesus. If you came to faith before baptism, baptism still confirmed your faith, and it increases your confidence in God's promises.

Baptism is a great gift no matter when it is administered in a person's life. Because of what it gives, we want people to be baptized as soon as possible, preferably a short time after birth. We want them to be joined to Christ and covered in His righteousness. We want them to be freed from the devil's kingdom of darkness and transferred to God's kingdom of light. We want them to receive what Jesus began at His baptism and what He brought to completion through His death and resurrection. Baptism is where it began for Jesus, and **Baptism Is Where It Begins** for you and me. As Paul said in another place, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come"* (2Cor. 5:17).

Jesus did not look that special to His Nazareth neighbors, even though He was the holy Son of God. His baptism seemed ordinary too, until God the Father opened the heavens to send down the Holy Spirit and declare His love for His Son. You likewise do not look so special to the people of this world. They do not recognize that the almighty God has claimed you as His own child, and that He did this at your baptism. Your baptism certainly looked ordinary. But when the water was applied while the words were spoken, God the Holy Spirit descended upon you,

God the Son joined your body to His, and God the Father declared you to be His beloved, with whom He is well-pleased.

In baptism, heaven was opened to you, and it does not close as long as you continue to hear and believe the gracious promises of God. Now may He who began a good work in you bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:6).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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