

Quinquagesima Sunday | The Baptism of Jesus
St. Matthew 3:13-17: "In Baptism, God Comes Down with Grace."
March 2/3, 2019 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

+ + +

Lord God, heavenly Father, You manifested Yourself, with the Holy Spirit, in the fullness of grace at the baptism of Your dear Son, and with Your voice directed us to Him who has borne our sins, that we might receive grace and the remission of sins: Keep us, we beseech You, in the true faith; and inasmuch as we have been baptized in accordance with Your command, and the example of Your dear Son, we pray You to strengthen our faith by Your Holy Spirit, and lead us to everlasting life and salvation; through Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH, p. 152)

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

The sermon text for today is taken from the third chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses 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, who did not come "into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him" (Joh. 3:17), dear fellow redeemed:

When John the Baptizer started preaching in the wilderness of Judea, the prominent theme of his preaching and teaching was repentance. God sent him to be a voice waking people up from their spiritual slumber. John didn't hold back. He didn't care what sort of standing a person had, or what might happen if he pointed out their sin. When he saw a number of the Jewish religious leaders coming to be baptized, he called them a "brood of vipers" (Mat. 3:7). He told them to "[b]ear fruit in keeping with repentance" (v. 8). If they would not, they would be "cut down and thrown into the fire (v. 10).

And if you think I'm tough, he said, just wait till you meet the One who comes after me, "whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (vv. 11-12). What sort of man did the people expect would follow John? Whatever they imagined, John's message made them all the more ready to humble themselves and acknowledge their sins.

I

When the people thought about the coming Messiah, perhaps they thought about the times God made His presence known to the people of Israel. They may have imagined the descent of the LORD upon Mount Sinai when He delivered His law to Moses. The whole mountain was wrapped in smoke as though coming from a great furnace. The mountain shuddered, and when Moses spoke, God answered in thunder (Exo. 19:18-19). Is this how it would be with the One who followed John? Or would He come in a thick cloud like the one that filled the holy place of the tabernacle and temple (Exo. 40:34-38, Lev. 16:2,30)?

While the people waited with nervous anticipation and fear, Jesus was quietly going about His business in Nazareth. We know nothing about His life from His youth until the start of His public work except for the words of St. Luke: *"And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and men"* (2:52). So He was intelligent and well thought of in His community. But no one would have matched Him with John's description of the Coming One. Would that change with His official anointing?

His anointing as the Christ is recorded for us in today's text. He came where John was by the Jordan River to be baptized by him. John did not realize yet that Jesus was the Christ, but he knew that Jesus was a righteous man. He said, *"I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?"* Jesus' response shows that He had not come to condemn everyone. He came *"to fulfill all righteousness."* This required Him to be baptized, to join the company of sinners who also entered the waters.

But He was not baptized to wash away *His* sin. He had no sin of His own to wash away! He was baptized for all humanity, in every sinner's place. He offered Himself as their Substitute, taking their sins upon Himself, sins that He would pay for with His life at Calvary. The significance of this moment was clear by what happened next. Jesus came out of the water, and *"the heavens were opened to Him."* Then the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove and rested upon Him, and a voice came from above, *"This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."*

Now John knew. This was the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior promised for thousands of years. *"I myself did not know him,"* John said, *"but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit'"* (Joh. 1:33). So the Coming One had come. But He did not come exactly as expected.

God the Son did not descend from heaven with fire and smoke and other terrifying displays of power. He came humbly, looking just like other men. The other Persons of the Trinity revealed themselves in humble ways too. God the Holy Spirit appeared in the form of a small dove. And God the Father spoke from heaven clearly but gently and with a message of love. In other words, the Triune God revealed Himself at the Jordan River not with terrifying displays of glory and might, but with grace.

This looks so different than the scene at Mount Sinai, but then the purpose of God's appearance was different at each place. At Mount Sinai, God was giving the people His law. The law should provoke fear in the hearts of sinners. If they do not do God's will, they must answer for their transgressions. This was emphasized by all the burning, smoking, and thundering on the

mountaintop. This was a God who should not be taken lightly, and who expected the people to obey Him.

What happened at the Jordan River was not a display of God's wrath, as those who heard John might have expected. Jesus' baptism was a display of the Gospel, of God's love for humankind by sending them a Savior. Jesus had come to give Himself in the place of sinners and to fulfill all righteousness for them, so they would not have to face the holy wrath of God.

II

What we see at Jesus' baptism is how it is for our baptisms too. There are some who would turn baptism into a law event. They say that baptism is about what we do for God. They think this is where we must fully dedicate ourselves to Him and promise to live a holy life. It's no wonder that these do not find comfort in their baptism. They know they have not lived up to their promise. They know they lack the righteousness that God requires.

But baptism is not a law event, it is a Gospel event. It is where God commits Himself to us. It is where He makes promises that are as sure and unchanging as He is. It is where He bestows His forgiveness on us and covers us with His righteousness. There are many beautiful passages in Scripture that underscore this.

Listen to Titus 3:5-7 and ask yourself who is doing the action: is it us, or is it God? *"[A]ccording to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."* This says that God saved us by His mercy, washed us in baptism, and applied Christ's perfect work to us. We are now justified—declared innocent—by His grace and are counted as heirs of God.

Romans 6:4 explains how baptism marks the drowning of our sinful nature and the awakening of faith. *"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."* Galatians 3:27 tells us that we look much different in God's sight after our baptism than we did before. *"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ."*

These and many other passages teach us that **In Baptism, God Comes Down with Grace**. We don't go to Him to give Him something He needs. He comes down to us to give us the blessings that we couldn't live without. It doesn't seem possible that baptism would have such significance. It looks so simple. What good can a couple handfuls of water and one short sentence do? But Jesus' baptism probably didn't look very impressive either. We learn about its significance by the subsequent opening of heaven, the Holy Spirit's descent, and the voice of the Father.

The Triune God does not show His presence at our baptisms, but He promises that He is here. It is His Word and ultimately His water that are used in baptism. He is the One who gives parents and guardians the will to bring their children to baptism, and He is the One who calls pastors to administer baptism. The Lord wants people to be baptized, and He does not fail to be present with His gifts.

Because His power and promise are what drive baptism, it only needs to happen once for each individual. If baptism were simply an expression of our commitment to God, we would need to be baptized many times, because our commitment toward Him is constantly in flux. But because baptism is a sacrament from God through which He makes a commitment to us, it is only needed one time.

We are baptized once only, but we return to those cleansing waters of baptism every time we repent of sin and trust in the gracious forgiveness of Jesus. In confession, the penitent sinner is really asking God, "Do You still love me? Do the promises You made at my baptism still stand?" And the absolution is God's reply, "Yes, the work of My Son to save you is finished. Through His blood your sins are forgiven, and His righteousness is yours by faith. I have not and will not change My mind about you; you are My baptized child."

The absolution is God's assurance that heaven remains open to all who trust in Him. Heaven was opened to you at your baptism just as it was opened to Jesus at His baptism. From heaven, the Father continues to speak His gracious Word, the Son continues to apply His forgiveness and righteousness to you, and the Holy Spirit continues to fill you with His comfort and peace.

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.

+ + +