

First Sunday after the Epiphany; The Baptism of Our Lord; January 9, 2022

+ Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 +

“His Baptism Makes Yours Real”

**The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might be the Christ. John answered them all, “I baptize with water. But someone mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”**

**...When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. While he was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form as a dove. And a voice came down from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with you.”**

Do you ever hear or read a Bible story and ask yourself “Why?” Maybe today’s Gospel is one of those stories that could make you scratch your head and ask, “Why?” John the Baptist baptizes our Savior Jesus in the waters of the Jordan River just as Jesus begins to preach and teach publicly, about three years before Jesus will die and rise. But why?

In his faithful summary of the blessings of baptism, Dr. Martin Luther writes in his Small Catechism: “Baptism works the forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this.” We believe this not because Dr. Luther says so. We believe it because what he writes is thoroughly scriptural. (See Matthew 28, Acts 2, Colossians 2, Romans 6, Titus 3, and 2 Peter 3.) This is what baptism does: God uses it to create or strengthen faith in Jesus in a human heart. Through that faith in Jesus, God forgives sins, delivers from eternal death and the devil, and replaces that sentence of eternal death with the promise of eternal life.

But why, then, was Jesus baptized? His faith is already perfect. He has no sins to forgive. He is already free from Satan’s power. He is the eternal God, and does not need the promise of eternal life. So then why is he baptized?

We might ask the same question when Dr. Luther summarizes the Bible’s teaching about the meaning of baptism for our everyday life: “Baptism means that the sinful nature in us should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also means that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” This (again in alignment with Scripture) says God’s gift of baptism gives people the power to say “no” to the sinful nature that wants to disobey God, and the power to live for the will of God instead. But Jesus is already perfect. He has no sinful nature to drown. He does not need to repent and begin to live in righteousness and purity. He already is righteous and pure. So then why is Jesus baptized, anyway?

If you’re having a hard time answering that question, don’t worry. You’re in good company. John the Baptist didn’t know why, either. In fact, when Jesus went to John for baptism, **John tried to deter Jesus, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”** So at first, John the Baptist didn’t get it either. Why does the holy Son of God need to be baptized?

Well, let's fast forward a few years in the life of Jesus. It is forty days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead. He is standing on top of a mountain with his disciples. In just a few moments, Jesus will ascend back into heaven. But before he does, he commands his disciples: **"Therefore go and gather disciples from all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to keep all the instructions I have given you."** Jesus commands his followers to baptize. He commands us to baptize and to be baptized. And simply put, that's one reason why Jesus was baptized: he does everything he commands us to do.

We see that fact throughout Jesus' life on this earth. Jesus tells us to pray; so Jesus prays. Jesus tells us to proclaim faithfully every last bit of God's holy Word; so Jesus proclaims faithfully every last bit of God's holy Word. Jesus tells us to be kind to others; so Jesus is kind to others. Jesus tells us to overcome temptation; so Jesus overcomes temptation. Jesus tells us to love; so Jesus loves. Jesus tells us to proclaim the good news to those who do not know it; so Jesus proclaims the good news to those who do not know it. Whatever Jesus commands us to do, he does himself. Jesus commands baptism; so Jesus is baptized. Our Savior Jesus does everything he commands us to do.

This is why, when John the Baptist tried to stop Jesus from being baptized, Jesus responded: **"Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."** Jesus commands from us all righteousness, and that includes baptism. Jesus fulfills all righteousness, including his own command of baptism.

After all, what would it make Jesus if he commanded baptism but refused to do it himself? What do you call a person who demands other people do something but won't do it himself? The words "phony" or "hypocrite" might come to mind. Jesus is no hypocrite or phony. If he commands it of others, he does it himself. Jesus lives a holy life in every last detail, without cutting any corners. He keeps the commands of God with perfect accuracy and completeness.

And what does that have to do with you? It means you have a Savior who is absolute perfection, without one ounce of hypocrisy or corner-cutting. It means that when you were baptized into your Savior Jesus, you were baptized into complete perfection, baptized into the one who fulfilled all righteousness without exception on your behalf. Because your Savior was baptized – because he kept every righteous command without exception – his absolute righteousness became yours when you were baptized into him.

And so your baptism is something special. It is something real. It connects you by faith to Jesus' life of absolute righteousness. So now, through that faith, you are perfectly righteous in the eyes of God. If Jesus had cut one little corner, if he had disobeyed one little command, your baptism would do nothing for you. You would be baptized into the life of a hypocrite who makes commands but does not keep them. But because Jesus kept every command, including being baptized, your baptism is something valuable, real, and special. It is a baptism into the total righteousness of Jesus' perfect life.

When John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing, he told the people: **"I baptize you with water. But someone mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."**

Before modern farm equipment, farmers separated wheat from chaff the old-fashioned way. They took a giant fork with long tines and stuck into a pile of wheat. Then they held the end of the fork up in the wind. The garbage, the chaff, just blew away in the breeze, and later it was burned up like the useless stuff it was. But the good stuff, the wheat, was heavy enough that it would fall to floor, and be gathered into the barn. John the Baptist tells us the day is coming when Jesus will judge all mankind. He will stick his winnowing fork into the world and lift out every human soul. Some souls will blow away like chaff and be burned up forever. But the good stuff, the wheat, will be gathered into the barn of heaven to be with God. When that happens, where are you going to end up? And why? And how do you know?

On that day, you, a believer in Jesus, will fall to the floor as the good stuff, the wheat. And Jesus will gather you into heaven. That will happen because you trust in him as your perfect Savior; his perfection is yours through faith. And you have that saving faith because the Holy Spirit baptized you into Jesus' life of total righteousness.

Still, our human reason scoffs at the idea that a righteous life lived by just one man could do so much good for all of us. How is it possible for just one holy life to mean that God calls us all holy? This is another reason why Jesus was baptized: so you could see this scene, and hear these words: **When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. While he was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with you."**

At Jesus' baptism, we hear God the Father speak directly from heaven. And we see Holy Spirit there, too, in the form of a dove. The presence of the Father and the Spirit tells us this is not just a righteous man's baptism. The man in the Jordan River belongs with the Father and the Spirit; this is God, the Second Person of the Trinity, who is baptized in the Jordan River. To leave no doubt, God the Father says from heaven, **"You are my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with you."**

Why was Jesus' baptized? So we could see the Spirit there with him. So we could hear the Father's voice from heaven and know: this Jesus being baptized in the Jordan, this Jesus living a life of all righteousness in every detail, belongs with the Spirit and the Father; he is the very Son of God. Because Jesus is God, he has the power to take his righteous life and spread it across all humanity, crediting his holy life to each and every one us. Yes, the holy life of one man does mean so much for so many. For that one man is true God, and we see proof of it at his baptism.

Why was Jesus baptized? To be totally righteous for you, so that when you were baptized into him, you received nothing less than perfection, and the promise of heaven when Jesus returns to judge. And he was baptized so that you would see him as God, equal with Father and Spirit – God with the power to drape his perfection over all.

Because of what you see in Jesus' baptism, you know that yours is real. His baptism gives these words of St. Paul all their truth and power: **[God] saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.** It makes true these words that St. Peter

wrote: **Baptism now saves you.** What we see in our Savior's baptism means that today little Mason Rowdy Michels is getting much more than a family photo op. (Though today's good for that, too.) He gets the gift of faith in Jesus; through that faith, he gets the perfect life of Jesus credited to his account; he gets the gift of one day standing before his Judge righteous. And so did you, in your baptism.

And, just one more thing: because you received all those blessings in baptism, you also received power. You received power to rise up each day from those saving waters and keep God's will in your life. Baptism is power to live for God's will, and Jesus' baptism shows us this, too. It's true Jesus didn't need baptism to forgive his sins or give him faith. But was Jesus going to need power to do God's will? Oh, yes. Because Jesus was human, too. He was skin, muscle, and bones like you and me. And on the way to the cross, Satan was going to tempt him and tempt him hard. Jesus' baptism was power to maintain the perfect life into which we are baptized.

And your baptism is power to live for God's will, too. When you wake each morning, remember what God did for in those waters. And use it. Use the love and salvation of God in your heart to say to give a hard no to Satan's temptations. Use the saving waters of your own baptism to stand firm in the Lord's will. It's power to live for the one who died and rose for you.

Jesus is baptized for this: in his baptism, you know that yours is real salvation and real power to live a godly life. Amen.