

Matthew 3.13-17
The Baptism of Our Lord
13 January 2019
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

No wonder John is confused. For his is a Baptism of repentance. As in: You have sinned. Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

But now, out of the crowds gathered around him at the Jordan, steps Another. The Only Righteous. The Just and Justifier of all flesh.

With a confused look on his face, John would prevent Him.

Wouldn't you?

Wouldn't you say: No, Lord! This bath is for sinners! This water is for those who love their sin so much the only way it can be stopped is with their death. With their drowning. This washing is for those who hate their sin and can't do anything about it. So deeply is it entrenched in their life and being!

That's what John thought, at least. And so John would prevent him.

Because he knew a little about what it was like to be a sinner. No holier-than-thou prophet, this one.

And he knew it the same way you do. Despite the camel hair and locust diet. Despite making himself repugnant to polite company. Despite his desert hermit's life—still, there was no tamping down what welled up from the heart. A constant stream of it. Just like the Jordan's flow.

He couldn't imagine life without the double-take at the pretty woman over there. Who was not his wife. Or the dreams of an entirely different life...and wife.

He couldn't imagine life without all the aching and longing—the aching and longing for a better place to live! Better food to eat! Nicer clothes! A life without his own deep satisfaction with his own dissatisfaction.

He couldn't imagine life not harboring his many childhood grievances at father and mother. At everything he was left out of as a kid when the Gentiles played and he sat impatient in synagogue.

He couldn't imagine a good bit of gossip that didn't turn on the sin of human conflict. Or a good TV show. Or short story. Or novel.

Because John wasn't so much a saint as he was what you are. A sinner.

Oh, like you—like every sinner—he was pretty good at putting on a show. He wasn't what his fellow Jews called a ἁμαρτωλός [*hamartōlós*—a sinner like *that!* A pig-eating, brothel-visiting, tax-collecting sinner. Hardly at all.

But what came out of the heart just would not stop—not any less than him standing in the middle of the Jordan could make the river stop flowing.

And *that's* what his Baptism was for. For sinners. For those who, to be rid of their sin, must be put to death and drowned. For the crowds that swarmed him from Jerusalem. For himself. For you.

But not for the Lord Jesus Christ. The Only Righteous. The Just and the Justifier.

And so John would have prevented Him.

But John was desperately wrong in his calculus. And he earned a sharp rebuke from Jesus. “It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” All righteousness. No part left unturned.

Because for once—just for once in the whole wide world, John!—it's not about *me*. Or about *you*. It's about *Jesus*.

That's the Gospel, isn't it?

It's about what *Jesus* does. For you.

It's about the life *Jesus* lived. For you.

It's about the death *Jesus* died. For you.

It's about Christ's ascension to the right hand of the Father where He intercedes. For you.

Right?

Well, then, it's also about the Baptism *Jesus* undergoes—a Baptism of repentance and righteousness.

And ... Yes ... That, too, is for you.

A Baptism of perfect repentance. To replace your half-hearted repentance.

And not for sins of His own doing. But of your doing.

A Baptism into an everlasting righteousness and innocence and blessedness. To replace your herky-jerky righteousnesses. That smell like so many week-old dish rags.

To swap the innocence of the Only Righteous for your jaded innocence.

And to give you the blessedness you can only imagine when you read Psalm One, but that you certainly have not known and cannot know by experience. The blessedness of the man who meditates on the Law day and night.

That's what it means for the God and Lord of heaven and earth to fulfill all righteousness. He leaves no stone unturned. Every law of God—perfectly fulfilled. Every penitential act—perfectly done. Every payment for sin—perfectly and ungrudgingly rendered. For you.

But here's the kicker.

The means by which He fulfills all righteousness on your behalf is the very same means by which He gives it to you. Washed onto Him in the Jordan are all your sins, like so many particles of dirt suspended in that flow of mud. Inflicted upon Him in the Jordan is all your dying and death.

And washed off of Him into every water taken in His name and at His command is this: for your sins, all His righteousness. For your dying and death, all His rising and living.

And it is precisely for this—this magnificent, unimaginable exchange for good for evil, of life for death—it is precisely for this that the voice of the dear Father in heaven proclaims from the cloud: "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

The pleasure of the heavenly Father rests upon the Son because the Son is the perfect expression of the Father's love. This is the kind of God you have: one who longs to supply your every need. One who would do for you what you cannot do for yourself. One who would live the life owed by creature to Creator. One who would die the death that is the wages for your sins. Who would do that all. And then actually *does* do it all. In the Son.

And though the voice called out from the heavens in time. At a specific time. At a specific place. It's actually the utterance of His eternal plan and purpose. This is how the Lord has always wanted to be your God. By giving Himself to you. And in giving Himself to you, making yours what you had lost—His paradise. His heaven. His eternal life. All the blessings given to Adam and Eve when He first created them. But now restored to you in the Second Adam, Jesus Christ. Double for your sins. Conveyed to you by water taken at His Word and command.

I just read something the other day: "People by nature care what others think about them." The most recent *Consumer Reports*. Page 41. It was an article on tipping. But that doesn't really matter.

What matters is the truth of the statement. People by nature care what others think about them.

Luther put it a different way. In his *Disputation Concerning Man* he defined a human person this way: *hominem posse justificari*—a human being is a being that can be 'justified.' This is just our nature.

Now think about that. If that's who we were—we *can* be justified—the only result can be this: we will *seek* to be justified.

And so ... we find our justification in the approval others give to us. In the kind, affirming comments we hear.

If you don't believe how much you seek and need to be justified, because you can, just think about it. When you don't hear kind and affirming words but only criticism and complaint, what do you do? You

either go into defense mode or seek another source of affirmation and acceptance. That's just the way your built.

Now, at least.

But you're built that way because of what you've lost. Adam's unflagging trust in God was affirmed by God's gift to him of unending life. But he lost it by his sin. And that loss he passed on to every one of his descendants. To you. To me. You got that? The only true affirmation that every mattered? Lost!

And so do we seek affirmation and acceptance? You bet we do.

Except, it's in all the wrong places. Because the affirmation and acceptance—the justification you're looking for—is the justification that deals with the death sentence hanging over your heads. And no compliment from another, no affirmation from a teacher or a boss, no acceptance for all that you could achieve in life, can give that. They come. They go. *And whatever they tell you is entirely dependent on you.*

No. The affirmation and acceptance—the justification—you're actually looking for is an eternal one. A divine one. A justification that leads to and gives the life that you lost for your sin. An acceptance that means you have God as your Friend, and not the cold, impersonal universe as your enemy. An affirmation that you are pleasing to God, and not damnably despised by Him. A justification unearned. Undeserved. Unmerited. Not contingent upon *you*, but entirely on the favor, character, and good will of the One who grants it. One given gratis, without regard for who you really are and for the cesspool of sin that is your heart.

That's actually what you're looking for. In fact, it's what everyone is looking for.

But you can stop looking.

Because remember. In your Baptism whatever was yours has been made Christ's. And whatever was Christ's has been made yours. And the eternal pleasure that the Father has in the Son—"This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased"? —Because of *your* Baptism into *Christ* it's as if the Father spoke those words not over His beloved Son, but over you. So that when the Father sees you He doesn't see you as you see yourself—your sins and death. He can't. You're clothed in Christ. All He sees is His beloved Son. Because what in Baptism was washed off of you—your sin and death—Christ has conquered in His own death. And what in His Baptism was washed off Him—His righteousness and eternal life and the great pleasure of the Father—that He has made *yours* in your Baptism.

And that's exactly how the Only Righteous One fulfills all righteousness. He becomes *yours*. Amen.

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