

Matthew 3.13-17
The Baptism of Our Lord
9 January 2022
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.

It probably seems a little out of place. We've jumped from the visit of the wisemen just a couple nights ago on Epiphany, just after which the infant/toddler Jesus was whisked away by pious mother and adoptive father to Egypt to avoid Herod's murderous rage at another King. From that point in His earliest years to this point—His Baptism—at the start of His public ministry.

But this is how Epiphany is. It's not concerned so much to give us a sequence of events as it is to give us little pieces of a mosaic drawn from Christ's earthly life that *demonstrate* the Christmas glory of which John speaks: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us; and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. When they're all put together you see it clearly, exactly what Peter declared to Jesus in Matthew 16: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"

The Baptism of our Lord in this regard surely doesn't disappoint. If the Epiphany Gospel wasn't clear enough—when the Lord God, the Creator of heaven and earth, caused a miraculous star to rise at His birth in the flesh, such an obvious sign that even the pagan magi knew it. When the magi took such pains—two months of travel, countless dangers, even the raging madness of King Herod, into whose lands they had come as foreigners—to come and see Him who was born King of the Jews. When the magi spilled their treasures before Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh, offerings to a god. And when finally they knelt before Him and worshipped Him as the very God who had made the star rise and through His Word had drawn them to Him, though spoken by His blood enemies.

If that weren't enough to say that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God." If that weren't enough to say, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." If it weren't already enough, if that's too "circumstantial" to stand up in court, well, then, here, in the Baptism of our Lord, we have a witness and a testimony that can find no rebuttal. For, according to the Law of Moses, the testimony of two is true. (John 8.17; Deuteronomy 17.6, Numbers 35.30).

Here, Jesus makes no claims of Himself. But the Holy Spirit descends like a dove. And rests upon Him. And the Father from the very heavens cries out, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased," words that we'll hear again at the end of Epiphany at our Lord's Transfiguration, when His glory as of the only-begotten cannot be held in.

As they say: that pretty much seals the deal. This is the main teaching of Epiphany and the main doctrine the Holy Scriptures: Jesus Christ, who is indubitably true Man, born of the Virgin Mary, is also—and indubitably and irrefutably, on the testimony of two witnesses, divine ones at that, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity.

Beloved in the Lord: this doctrine of the Holy Scriptures is worthy in its own right. Worthy to hold and believe, to teach and confess.

But there's no doctrine of the Holy Scriptures that isn't also useful.

And the usefulness of this doctrine—that Jesus is the Son of the Living God, that Jesus is the Word made flesh, the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth, that to see the Man Jesus is to see the Eternal God—the usefulness of this is abundantly shown in the Baptism of Our Lord.

Because here Jesus does what He always does: He takes the side and part of sinners.

You see, John was sent to baptize a Baptism of repentance. His cry on the banks of the Jordan River was “Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is near.”

Now you know who repents, who alone repents: it's sinners. And so sinners, preparing for the coming kingdom of heaven in which they were to be given the forgiveness of their sins—sinners went out to be baptized by John, confessing their sins.

Now look, it's not like this Baptism of John was a strange thing for the Jews. At all. You know what Baptism is: it's the application of water.

And Baptisms abounded in the Old Testament.

The people of Israel baptized their clothing in when the Lord God came down to Sinai.

Because even they were sinners, Aaron and his sons were baptized prior to their ordination into the priesthood of the tabernacle.

Because not even birth in the tribe of Levi made you without sin, the Levites were sprinkled with water before assuming their duties.

Healed lepers were baptized in their bodies and clothing.

Those who had touched the unclean dead were sprinkled with water flung off a hyssop branch.

Even those who hadn't shed innocent blood had their hands baptized, for they were not unguilty of failing to help and support their neighbor in every physical need.

I'm gonna stop here. But I could go on. The list is huge. But you get the point. Baptism, all Baptism, it's for the unclean, for sinners. For intentional sinners. For unintentional sinners. For those who did sin; for those who were touched by the sin of others. And even its effects. For sinners of commission. For sinners of omission. For born sinners. For practiced sinners. There's no such thing as an Israelite Baptism but that it isn't also for sinners. Saints need no Baptism.

But when the Holy Son of God in the flesh, Jesus Christ, showed up at the banks of the Jordan where John was baptizing, a most unexpected thing happened. Though He Himself through the mouth of Moses had instituted every Israelite Baptism with one purpose, and one purpose only, that the unholy might have truck with Him, Holy God—He didn't show up to supervise John's work. He didn't show up to critique it. He didn't show up just to see how things were going.

He showed up to be baptized Himself.

John found this as out-of-whack, as logic-defying, as you do. Baptism isn't for Holy God! It's for fallen Adam and all his descendants. Baptism isn't for God, who dwells among His people in His tabernacle; it's for His people, that they might dare approach Him there.

But now, the Son of God, tabernacling among His people in their flesh presents Himself before John to be baptized. And John responded just like you would: “I—I’m a sinner. It’s me who should be baptized, not You!”

I want you to think about how strange that must have been for John. Imagine that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself had come here this morning. All 5’-6” of Him. He came in through the narthex door just as Pr. Kerns was saying, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” And together with you, now standing in the pew right back there by the doors, Jesus had said, “But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Every last one of us would scramble to turn things around. Jesus should be standing in the narthex door hearing the confession of the congregation, not in the midst of the congregation speaking the confession with them. Jesus should be the one absolving sins, not the one hearing the absolution!

True, right? Because face-to-face with incarnate holiness, with God Himself in the flesh, every last shred of your own holiness must melt away under the divine brilliance of the Holiness of the only Son from heaven. To behold Him is to behold the only holiness there is.

So you get the drama of the moment, don’t you? John simply cannot permit Holy God to undergo a Baptism intended for sinners.

But if this is how he thought—if this is how you think—how wrong you are.

For at His Baptism the only Son from heaven wishes you to think nothing else of His holiness than that it’s this: He takes the side and part of sinners. His righteousness is this: that He is numbered among sinners. His loving justice is this: that though He knew no sin, He was made to be sin *for us*. His glory is this: that He hates nothing He created, but loves it. That He has an infinite compassion over it. That there is no sin so great but that He cannot remove it and cast it like a mountain into the depths of the sea. That there is no transgressor so vile but that to save him He will cover Himself in transgressor’s filth. That there is no guilt so deep but that He gladly owns it. That there is no shame of sin, no curse of Law, but that He Himself willingly suffers it.

And so Jesus spoke to John: “No. I must be baptized. For in this way and this way alone can we fulfill all righteousness.” John, the Baptizer. Jesus, the Baptizand. The sins of the baptized Baptizer washed onto Jesus. The righteousness of Jesus washed onto John. For thus it is fitting for them to fulfill all righteousness.

Beloved in the Lord: that fitting righteousness has been fulfilled for you, too.

For it was no slightly-better-than-you sinner whom John baptized. It was the Holy Son of God, upon whom the Spirit descended like a dove, over whom the Father declared, “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.”

You see, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, the Word made flesh, has been numbered among sinners to bear their sins. To bear your sins. That is His holiness. His righteousness. That is the glory of the only-begotten Son of God. Dripping with grace. And shot through with the truth above all truths: your sins are forgiven. And through your Baptism He has made every one of you an heir, a partaker, a recipient, an object of that rich, saving, sin-forgiving grace.

Amen.

pax dei, etc.

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