

The Baptism of Our Lord

Mt 3:13-17

January 10, 2021

Grace to you and peace from
God our Father and from the
Lord Jesus Christ.



Baptism in View of Death

For us Christians Baptism is a cornerstone upon which the church is founded. It is a cornerstone upon which our faith and our lives rest. We confess, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”¹ It is through your Baptism that you are, as St. Paul writes, “in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.”² In those waters the rubber meets the road: the promises won for us on the cross by the shedding of the Blood of the Lamb are doled out in a very real and present way. As Lutherans we confess that the grace of God comes to us by means, by the power of the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament, and so today as we remember and celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord let us look once again at the miracle of this sacrament of Holy Baptism, in view of His death and resurrection, and ours.

¹ Eph 4:5–6.

² 1 Co 1:30.

In St. Matthew's Gospel we see the moment of intersection between John who is called the baptizer and Jesus who now begins His earthly ministry. St. Mark says of John's baptism that it is "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."³ Earlier in his Gospel St. Matthew calls it a baptism of "water for repentance." The Lutheran Confessions teach us that repentance has two parts. John had come to prepare the way and to prepare hearts with contrition and confession, which is the first part of repentance. Yet in this contrition and confession John does not have the fullness of salvation to give. He always stressed this very important point, there there was someone coming after him, "mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry."⁴ So, we might ask, what was lacking in the baptism of John? The answer: a Saviour, the forgiveness of sins, new life itself, salvation and blessedness. What was lacking was the Gospel promise, for we understand repentance not not only as sorrow for what we have done – contrition and confession – but also the gracious words of absolution that offer forgiveness, in faith, to all who believe. That's the second part of repentance. John therefore rightly points us to Jesus, the Lamb of God who comes, our Saviour, to do just that: to take away the sins of the world.

When He came, John said, the Christ would Baptize with the Holy Spirit. One day Jesus did come, the Lamb of God comes to John out of Galilee, and He comes "to be baptized by him." Like John we see the problem right away. Why does Jesus need a baptism of repentance? Repent for what? Jesus comes to be baptized and yet we hear St. Paul who writes, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might

³ Mk 1:4.

⁴ Mt 3:11.

become the righteousness of God.⁵” He has no sin and yet there He is, wading into the Jordan with everyone else. What John says when Jesus comes to him makes sense to us! He says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”⁶ Jesus has the answer. And in Jesus’ response we hear the very first words of our Lord recorded by St. Matthew in his Gospel: “let it be so now.” In that moment Jesus fulfills what the prophets had longed for, because when Jesus stands in the Jordan river He is there as the Servant who comes to suffer for His people. We heard of this in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, who proclaims, “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”⁷ Jesus the Suffering Servant has come to suffer and die for His people.

You see, this forgiveness of sins that we seek and desire, it will not occur without payment, without satisfaction. But you can’t pay. There is nothing you have to offer because the payment is not yours. Who can do this? No offering is acceptable to God to pay for sin, says the Holy Scriptures, except the one sacrifice of Christ. It is His sacrifice and only His that works, because only there His innocence and righteousness are given to you. These things come to you and drown your sin and your death. “Let it be so now” says Jesus. Now! At that moment He takes on the commission of Suffering Servant and Messiah, the anointed One of God. “Let it be so now,” let the One who is marked to be the atoning sacrifice for the whole world be confirmed as the bearer of the Spirit of God. Let the One who is both Messiah and Suffering Servant go forth in obedience.

5 2 Co 5:21.

6 Mt 3:14.

7 Is 42:1.

There were no doubt others there that day standing in the river. Everyone else has come to the Jordan for their own sins. But Jesus has come not for His sins, but for those of the entire world. At His Baptism He stands in solidarity with all of us, for He is our brother, flesh and blood just like we are. “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”⁸ Righteousness is fulfilled because in Christ the will of the Father is truly known and really done. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”⁹ That none would perish – this is the will of the Father, to gather all people to himself in Christ Jesus, to restore the lost and the broken – sinners – back to a new life of forgiveness and hope through faith. Therefore we understand how the Baptism of Our Lord is accomplished in view of His death. This is because the obedience of the Suffering Servant that He shows in the river Jordan is made manifest on the cross. In that same obedience He goes forth to Calvary, praying, “not my will, but yours, be done.”¹⁰ His baptism was a turning point, not back to Nazareth, but out to the desert, then to His ministry of preaching and healing, then to the cross, the tomb, the resurrection, and His ascension into heaven. So we see in the Baptism of our Lord something like a coronation, which we Americans don’t quite get but but is likely more familiar on the Canadian side of the river. Here God places the crown on the Messiah’s head, here is the certainty of the call which will lead Him toward Calvary. There are no dark clouds and terrible lightning and thunder to mark this occasion. Rather the Holy Spirit descends as a dove and the voice of the Father announces and confirms the

8 Mt 3:15.

9 Jn 3:16.

10 Lk 22:42.

glory of what has been and is yet to be revealed: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”¹¹

So the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan points us to His death and resurrection. Now the Baptism that brings us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life is possible, because it is His Baptism. It becomes possible only because those events of Good Friday and Easter have been accomplished. So this is how you should understand your Baptism. It is something God does for us. Through the water and the Word he meets us and brings us into communion with the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism is a picture of burial in the grave – and resurrection. We hear St. Paul in the letter to the Romans: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 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.”¹² What St. Paul speaks of is our election in Christ. This is how we are saved, for unless one is born again to this new life he or she cannot receive the Kingdom of God. And how does this happen? “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”¹³ Water and spirit. Christ our Lord is Baptized in view of His death, and so are you. At your Baptism the old Adam was drowned and then you were raised again to a new life in Christ. Yes, that old Adam is a good swimmer, the sinful nature is always trying to bob to the surface. But you are Baptized, you stand in the forgiveness won on the Cross, and one day you will be raised again to everlasting life in

11 Mt 3:17.

12 Ro 6:3–4.

13 Jn 3:5.

Christ.

So a person is brought to the Baptismal font and nothing happens except that by God's command water is poured over that person and these words are spoken: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." And when and where this happens there is no doubt that in this Baptism, which is the outer sign of water along with the Holy Spirit, that this Baptism brings about new life, in faith. This is God's promise.

This is His Word. At Pentecost St. Peter said, "the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off."¹⁴ Yes, even little children, even babies, ought to and should be Baptized. They too belong in Christ's Kingdom, they too are members of His body.

Remember that salvation is a gift of God. Remember that Baptism is an act of God: "when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit."¹⁵

But don't people walk away from this gift which they have received? Indeed they do. We must be faithful and hold fast to what we have received. Faith and Baptism belong together. But it can happen that those who "have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come"¹⁶ will fall away. We know the signs of this, don't we?

A person consciously neglects the Divine Service, the Sacrament of the Altar, the Word, prayer. The Bible becomes a closed book, prayer is silenced, visits to church are limited.

But this does not somehow invalidate the promises of God given through Baptism. The

¹⁴ Ac 2:39.

¹⁵ Tt 3:4-5.

¹⁶ Heb 6:5.

promise of Baptism is still there, repentance is available for those who have turned away from the grace and mercy of our Father. God has never been unfaithful, his promises never go unfulfilled. So in faith keep hold of what has been given, and “let it be so now” and forever more, for you in your Baptism.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo Gloria