

Text: Matt 3:13-17, Ro 6:1-11 ✱ The Baptism of our Lord (1st Sunday after Epiphany)

Beloved of God

In the name of Him in whom we are born again of water and the Spirit, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: The Baptism of Jesus, which we celebrate today, has long been something of a theological mystery for many people. Certain parts of it don't seem to make a lot of sense. Here we have John, the Lord's forerunner, out in the Judean desert, standing at the Jordan River and calling sinners to repentance. He preaches God's Word with conviction and fury. And in response people come to him with broken hearts confessing their guilt. When they do, John gives them the promise of the One whose kingdom is about to be revealed, and he gives them a Baptism for the remission of their sins. All of which is just as it should be ... but the question comes up, "If John's Baptism was for repentant sinners, why did Jesus go to him to be baptized?" Jesus had no sins to confess, no reason to seek forgiveness. It was for *his* coming that John was preparing people. Why would Jesus have to prepare himself for that in the same way as everybody else?

And some have answered, "Well, even though Jesus hadn't sinned himself, Baptism was still a requirement of God; and so, in order to 'fulfill all righteousness' Jesus had to allow himself to be baptized. So he did it to keep the command of God." The only problem with that answer is that there were no specific requirements in God's Law for Jewish people to be baptized. It's true that there were a number of ritual washings required of priests serving at the Temple in Jerusalem; but Jesus never did that. He wasn't even of the right tribe to be a candidate: you had to be a Levite. So, simply to be obedient to a command of God cannot be the reason Jesus went to John for Baptism.

Now, it's also true that Gentile converts to the Jewish faith were baptized to signify their rebirth as Jews. In fact, that's a big part of what John's Baptism was all about. In the popular mindset, Baptism *wasn't* for Jews; it was for Gentiles – and so when a Jewish person went to John for Baptism, he was effectively saying, "Though I was born a child of Abraham, I haven't been living like one. I'm really no better than any Gentile. So, I want to clean the slate and start over. I want to come again into the family." And for a Jew that would have been a very difficult confession to make.

But again, none of this applies to the Lord Jesus. Not only was he a Jew, a full-blooded child of Abraham, he had also been living in perfect obedience to the Law of Moses. He alone could say that he was living as a Jew should. He had no reason to re-enter the family. So, we're stuck again asking, "Why did Jesus have to be baptized to 'fulfill all righteousness' when being baptized was not a requirement for him? In what sense was his baptism part of fulfilling all righteousness?"

Well, if we're a bit confused by it, at least we are in good company. John himself did not understand why Jesus came to be baptized and he tried to stop him. "This isn't for you", John told him. "You should be doing this to me. I'm the sinner who needs repentance, forgiveness, and rebirth; not you."

Jesus answered, "No, John, you need to go ahead and do this. For in this way we will fulfill all righteousness." John relented at the Lord's command and baptized Jesus; though it's not altogether clear that he understood *why* he had to do it. But

whether he understood or not, he put his finger right on the reason when he said to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you." You see, Jesus wasn't baptized to fulfill his own righteousness; he didn't need to. He was baptized to fulfill righteousness for us. We are the ones who are lacking the righteousness God requires. And so, Jesus wasn't baptized for himself. He was baptized for you and me.

As a matter of fact, he was baptized twice to fulfill all righteousness for us: once at the very beginning of his earthly ministry and once again at the very end of it. His entire teaching and healing ministry is bracketed by these two Baptisms, so we should look upon them as important events. It seems that the Scriptures deliberately intend to draw our attention to them. And when we do, we see that the difference between the two is like day and night.

The first Baptism, the one that we heard about today, was one of *approval*. We tend to think that Jesus' messianic mission to earth didn't begin until he was about thirty years old. But that's simply not so. While it's true that we don't know much about his early life, we do know that Jesus spent it living in a perfectly righteous way. Faced with all the temptations and problems common to each one of us, and without using his divine power in any way, he lived the life that none of us could: one of perfect obedience to God and showing perfect love for all people. He had to live this perfect life as a human in order to be our substitute – it's his righteousness that is credited to our account in the great exchange that takes place when we place our trust in him.

And so as he descends into the Jordan River to be baptized for us, we hear the Father's stamp of approval, telling us that Jesus qualifies in every way for the mission he is now about to undertake. As if to say, "I've examined him, and find no fault whatsoever", the Father declares, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." And from heaven the Father sends his Holy Spirit to fill Jesus in a special way and equip him to do the great task that lies before him – and thus to fulfill the words he spoke through the prophet Isaiah that we heard earlier: "Behold my Servant, whom I uphold, my chosen One in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring righteousness to the nations."

Sort of as a pertinent side note, it's interesting to me that in the first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the first time the word "love" is used is at the Baptism of Jesus. That's significant because love is such an important biblical theme. It really is what motivates the Lord to do the things he does. All his actions are directed by his inexplicable, all encompassing, self-sacrificing love. And three times we hear the voice of the Father proclaiming, "This is the Son I love." It seems designed to be emphatic. He does not want this to escape our attention.

Which makes it all the more striking when we get to St. John's Gospel because the first time the word "love" appears there is not at the Baptism of Jesus; but it is the context of Baptism that the word comes up. Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus about the need to be born again of water and the Spirit (that's Baptism), and tells him that the Son of Man must be lifted up on a cross, "For God so loved the world that he gave his Son..." Three times we are told of the Father's love for the Son, and then we are told that his love for us is so great that gave him up for us.

That's powerful. And it also ties in directly with Jesus' second Baptism. At one point in his ministry he told his disciples, "I have a Baptism to undergo, and how

distressed I am until it is accomplished.” He was speaking, of course, of his upcoming crucifixion. And if his first Baptism was one of approval, then we could say the second was one of condemnation. It is in many ways a negative image of the first.

Instead of descending into the cool water, Jesus is nailed to dry wood and lifted up into the baking sun to feel the fire of judgment. Instead of hearing the voice of his Father announcing his pleasure, he is greeted with a stony silence from heaven and the jeers of a mocking crowd. Instead of the warm glow of his Father’s love, he feels wave after increasingly higher wave of fury and loathing as the Father pours out his wrath upon him. And instead of receiving the Spirit, when his anguish is at its zenith, the Spirit is taken away from him and the Lord of life hangs his head in death...

... For us. Because of the Father’s great love for us Jesus became the bearer of our sin and disgrace, and so was subjected to the punishment that we by our rebellion against God so richly deserve. But this second Baptism of Jesus broke the power of sin and death. By letting the righteous anger of God fall upon him, he fully satisfied the justice of God. Sin was punished completely as it had to be with damnation and death. And so, when the dead body of Christ was buried, the penalty of sin had run its course.

Therefore, the grave could not keep him. When he rose again on the third day it proved that his Father had accepted the sacrifice for us and for our sin. He appeared to his disciples and told them to proclaim the Good News to all people – and to unite them with him by the newly created Sacrament of Christian Baptism.

This Baptism is the same one the Church employs today – that we have all received. It unites us with Jesus by fusing together in one the two Baptisms he underwent for us: both the Baptism of approval and that of condemnation – but for us the order is reversed. First, we have in Baptism God’s judgment against sin. It’s meant to drown the old sinful nature in us. Concerning it Paul writes, “*Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?*” That is to say, when we are baptized, the Father sees us in Christ on the cross. He sees our sins being justly punished. He sees us die with Christ. He sees his justice satisfied.

St. Paul goes on to say, “*We were buried therefore with him through 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.*” And here we see the Baptism of approval. Just as Christ emerges from the grave to live forever free from sin and death, in our Baptisms we rise with him. And as we come up from the water the Father’s voice is heard within the newly cleansed soul: “You are my beloved child, in you my soul takes delight.” And so saying, he places his Holy Spirit upon us to equip us to live the new life into which we have been reborn.

And there’s more. We learn in God’s Word that it’s a mistake to think of our Baptisms exclusively as a one-time event in the past. The Lord invites us to return daily, or even more often, to the moment of our Baptisms. When the conscience is burdened by guilt and by doubt, when we feel the weight of oppression that our ongoing failure to live as God’s children places upon us, we can return to the cleansing flood of God’s grace by confessing our sins to him. When we do, it is as he has promised: “He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

So, the Christian life begins in Baptism, and continues as a succession of returns to Baptism, daily dying and rising with Christ until we face the final Baptism that lies ahead for all of us. Just like Christ's ministry was bracketed by two major baptisms, ours are too – only with lots of returns in between. But like our Lord, it's correct for us to say, "I have a baptism to undergo – and how distressed I am until it's accomplished." In that final Baptism we will put to death the sinful old flesh once and for all, and our bodies will rest secure in Christ Jesus until he calls us forth to rise, never to die again.

I know some of our funeral directors get irritated with me because I insist that the baptismal font remain front and center when we have a funeral service here at the church. They think it disturbs the symmetry of the display that they want to create with the casket and the flowers and so on. They want everything picture perfect and all. But to be honest, I don't care so much about symmetry as I want to make apparent the important truth of what God gives us in and through Baptism. I want the casket of the beloved child of God snugged up right against the font to proclaim clearly that the Christian life which began by being united with Christ in his two baptisms will surely continue through this final baptism to everlasting life.

So, may we, who in Christ are beloved by God, continue to live in the grace he gave us in Baptism. And let's return to it daily for cleansing and renewal of the Spirit so that we may be empowered to walk in newness of life from now until the day he calls us for a final washing as we cross the Jordan into his Promised Land. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!