

# BAPTIZED FOR YOU

Matthew 3:13-17

The Baptism of Our Lord/First Sunday after the Epiphany (Series A)

January 12, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Gospel lesson for The Baptism of Our Lord, which is also the First Sunday after the Epiphany, comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 3, verses 13 through 17. It is on page 682 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus does something unexpected of him, and he does it for us. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 3, beginning at verse 13, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. <sup>16</sup> And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; <sup>17</sup> and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

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

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The really curious thing in the account of Jesus' Baptism is why Jesus was even baptized. John the Baptist obviously struggled with this; he even tried to prevent it. And when we understand the biblical teaching of what Baptism is and what it does, we might have a bit of a hang up here, too. Baptism works the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38), but Jesus doesn't have any sins to be forgiven. Baptism is "the washing of regeneration" (Titus 3:5), but Jesus wasn't born spiritually dead, like we are. And Baptism incorporates us into Christ. When we were baptized, we were baptized into Christ. So what was Jesus baptized into? Is he baptized into himself? That doesn't make any sense. For Jesus, his Baptism must mean something different than what it means for us, because all the reasons we are baptized simply don't apply to Jesus.

I'm not going to give you a complete apologetic for the doctrine of Baptism—why it saves (1 Pet. 3:21) and how it regenerates. I've done that before, and if you want that, I can find you those sermons. But at some point, it's okay to build on what has previously been established. So the only apologetic for our doctrine of Baptism I'll give you today is what John the Baptist has to say about it, because it gives us insight into his mind and why he would have prevented Jesus from being baptized.

Earlier in chapter 3—you can follow along with me, if you'd like—in verse 6, we see that people were confessing their sins when they came to be baptized. So we learn that Baptism has something to do with the forgiveness of sins. Then in verse 11, John says, "I baptize you with water for repentance." So we know that Baptism works repentance. The clearest evidence from John's ministry, however, is a verse that's repeated in both Mark and Luke (3:3). I'll read it from Mark this time. This is Mark, chapter 1, verse 4: "John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." What did John proclaim his baptism to be? Mark these words well: "A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Now this should be enough evidence to establish the fact that Baptism works repentance and the

forgiveness of sins, and we haven't even gotten to Christ's institution of Baptism or the apostles' teaching on the sacrament. And they, of course, do not contradict John's teaching, but uphold it and build upon it.

So we establish from John's teaching the fact that Baptism works repentance and the forgiveness of sins. And we also see from this why John would have prevented Jesus from being baptized. This is the Christ. Jesus is the sinless Son of God. He is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). This is what John has been preaching and will continue to preach about Jesus. Now put yourself in John's sandals. Would you baptize Jesus? If you've been baptizing sinners, in order for their sins to be forgiven, and proclaiming that the Christ and the Son of God is about to appear, when that Christ, the Son of God, comes to you and asks you to baptize him, would you do it? Of course not! *You're the Christ! You're the Son of God! You don't need repentance. You don't have any sins to be forgiven of. Being baptized would only make it look like you do. I should be baptized by you, not the other way around.*

So you can see why John tried to prevent Jesus from being baptized. Baptism forgives sins, but Jesus doesn't have any sins to be forgiven. But Jesus persuades John to do it by saying, "**Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness**" (3:15). Now what does that mean? There's a lot here. This is the central verse of the text, and it's our clue for understanding what's going on, so I want to break this down.

First, Jesus says, "**Let it be so now.**" This seems to be something Jesus said to satisfy John's expectations for the Messiah. John was a prophet of God, and he spoke truthfully about the Christ; he spoke the words the Holy Spirit gave him to speak. But that doesn't necessarily mean that John fully understood what Jesus came to do. From John's own preaching (e.g., 3:7, 1-12), and from his questioning of Jesus later in life (11:3), it seems that John expected Jesus to demonstrate more power and wrath against sin. It seems that, in John's mind, he was the eleventh-hour preacher, and Jesus was the judgment-bringer. People should repent now, because when the God and Christ appears, it'll be game over. But when Jesus comes to John for Baptism, he's identifying with sinners. Now, John spoke truthfully about Jesus, and John knew that Jesus is the Christ, but this is still not what John expected from the Christ. So when Jesus says, "**Let it be so now,**" he's indicating to John that he will not always present himself in this kind of humility. There will come a time when Jesus is revealed in power and glory, with great wrath, but it is not yet. For now, John must permit Jesus to identify with sinners, because, at this point, Jesus' mission is to save sinners, so that when he does come in power and great glory, we might be spared from his wrath.

Then Jesus says, "**For thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.**" His Baptism is "**fitting.**" John doesn't think it's appropriate for Jesus to be baptized, but Jesus says it is, and the explanation that follows will explain why.

The key phrase is, "**To fulfill all righteousness.**" How does Jesus' Baptism "**fulfill all righteousness**"?

When we think of the word "righteousness," we usually think of it as obedience to God's Law. It's doing what God has commanded and avoiding what he has prohibited. And that's not entirely wrong. It's simplistic, but not wrong. Righteousness, of course, includes the idea of doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong. So in this view of righteousness, we might think that Jesus is baptized simply because it's something God commands. Jesus is going to command us to be baptized, so Jesus is baptized too, simply because it's something people are supposed to do. But this explanation doesn't really account for anything Scripture teaches us about Baptism, other than the mere fact that it's commanded. If Jesus isn't baptized, no one would say, "Hey,

why do we have to be baptized when Jesus wasn't baptized?" The explanation would be simple: "Because we are baptized *into* Jesus." So it's really not a good explanation to say that Jesus is baptized simply because he will command us to do be baptized. This explanation also misses the great significance of Jesus' Baptism.

Here's a better way to understand the phrase, "**to fulfill all righteousness**": In the Old Testament, the righteousness of God often includes his saving actions. This is especially noticeable in the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 31; 71). Sometimes the word "righteousness" is roughly synonymous with "salvation." This is something I first learned when we were studying *Paul's Letter to the Romans* in Bible study. The phrase "the righteousness of God" is huge in that letter. And, based on the way the Old Testament speaks of God's righteousness, it's not simply that he does what is right, but that he does what is *most* right when he works salvation. The epitome of God's righteousness is his salvation. That is always true for anyone who is in a position to save.

Think about this with me. How is the righteousness of a firefighter manifested? Is it that he observes the speed limit when answering a call? I hope not. His righteousness is manifested when he rescues kittens from trees and runs into a burning building to save children. The epitome of his righteousness is his salvation. Now that doesn't mean that he can be a horrible person in every other way. If he steals jewelry from the burning house or goes home and kicks his dog, he's not really righteous. But, assuming that he's not a horrible person in other areas of life, in his vocation as a firefighter, the epitome of his righteousness is his salvation. The same is true for everyone in the position of savior, whether it's a police officer, doctor, nurse, EMT, lifeguard, or, in the case of Jesus, God. The righteousness of God means that he is right, and always does what is right, and he is *most* right when he saves.

So instead of seeing his Baptism as an act of obedience, we should see it as an act of salvation. That's what it means for God to be righteous.

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So how is Jesus' Baptism an act of salvation? It's not that his Baptism atones for our sins, okay? That's not what we're saying. Jesus atoned for our sins at the cross, and Jesus' Baptism points us forward to the cross. His Baptism is a shocking, and possibly offensive, example of Jesus identifying with sinners. That's what Jesus is doing here. He's identifying with sinners. He's standing in our place.

Baptism is for sinners. That much should be obvious about Baptism; it is specifically intended for sinners. That's the whole reason any of us are baptized. I am baptized and you are baptized because we have a sin problem. If we didn't have a sin problem, there would be no point to Baptism. Baptism is for sinners.

Now this, of course, is why we might struggle with Jesus being baptized. But, instead of making us struggle, we should really marvel at Jesus identifying with us in this manner. When he goes down in the water to stand in a place specifically intended for sinners, he identifies with us. And it's not simply that he identifies with us, but he especially identifies with our sin. That's what Jesus' Baptism is all about. It's about him standing in the place of sinners.

The classic explanation from Church History is that this is the point where Jesus took our sins upon himself. The idea is that they were imputed to him there, and he carried them in his body until he gets to the cross. But I think this explanation attempts to say too much. I don't know that we can say it's necessarily wrong, but we also don't have any evidence to say that it's right. What we do know is that when he was on the cross, he was bearing all of our sins in his body (1 Pet. 2:24). Scripture does tell us that, but it does not tell us at what point in history our sins were imputed to him. Nor do we need to know. We can see in his Baptism that he identifies

with us. And we know from Scripture that when he is on the cross, it's not just him there, but our sins are there with him. Jesus' Baptism looks forward to this. It's all about Jesus standing in the place of sinners.

Instead of causing us to stumble, it should make us marvel. God comes to stand in the place of sinners. If we stumble over his Baptism, we will stumble even more when he goes to the cross and then to the grave. Just as Baptism is specifically linked to sin, so is death. Death is only for sinners. The reason we die is because of our sin problem. Scripture is clear on this. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). If we weren't sinners, we wouldn't die.

And the cross is even more explicit. To get to the grave by means of the cross can only mean one thing: *you are the worst kind of sinner*. That's why Paul says the cross is "a stumbling block to Jews" (1 Cor. 1:23).

So why does Jesus die? Is it because he's a sinner? And why is the cross his path to death? Is it because he is the worst kind of sinner? No. It's because he identifies with our sin, and not just the sins we think aren't that bad. Even the criminal sins—the ones a government would want you dead for—Jesus takes those into his own body. Jesus goes to all the places that are specifically ordained for sinners. He goes to John for Baptism. He goes to the cross. He goes to the grave. And he does all of this to save us. He identifies with us, he takes up his lot with us, so that he might save us. This is the purpose of his Baptism.

And then the purpose of our Baptism is that we might be joined to him. Just as he came and identified with us, so he has also instituted Baptism as a means for us to identify with him. And not just to identify with him, but to be joined to him in his death and resurrection. This is what we heard in the epistle lesson from Romans 6:

"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.

"For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." (Rom. 6:3-5)

This is how Baptism saves. It's not our work; it's God's work. It's not our act of obedience; it's God's means of bringing the righteous salvation of Jesus Christ to us. It's not just water. And the water is not endowed with some magical quality to forgive our sins. The water does nothing on its own. But, when connected with the words Jesus prescribed, it joins us to Christ in his death and resurrection. This is how it saves. Through a sacramental union, it joins us to Jesus and his cross. Our Baptism, similar to Jesus' Baptism, is all about the cross. Jesus' Baptism looks forward to the cross. Our Baptism joins us to that cross.

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Jesus came to John. He insisted on walking down into the muddy waters of the Jordan River. He insisted on standing in the place of sinners. He went to Jerusalem and the cross. His disciples tried to talk him out of it. But Jesus insisted on hanging in the place of sinners. And he went to the grave. He was determined to be laid to rest in the place of sinners. He identified with us and went to all the places ordained for sinners. He did this so that he might also bring us to all the places ordained for the righteous Son of God. He makes his resurrection our place. He makes his Father's house our place. He identifies with us, in order to take us up into himself. In this way, he fulfills all righteousness. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.