

January 13, 2008
First Sunday After Epiphany

“Baptism Awe”

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 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; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Romans 6:1-11

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? 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. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Also see Isaiah 42:1-9

Sermon

Do you ever like to do something kind of strange just to see the look on a person's face? I do. It's fun to watch as someone's brain starts spinning, trying to figure out how to react to an action or request which is totally beyond reason. Just imagine what the reaction would be if you strolled up to the desk in the emergency room and said, "Excuse me. I'd like to be zapped with those electronic paddle thingies the doctors always use on TV." Or here's a good one for all the guys; stop by the medical mall and try to make an appointment for yourself...with an OB-GYN. One I would love to try someday after Sunday services is to stay in my black clerical garb and hang out in front of the local Catholic Church and try to meet girls. It would be a gas! People's jaws would drop and they would stare in silence for a few seconds as they tried to process these ridiculous requests. Eventually they would probably respond with what in so many words would be the equivalent of, "Are you nuts?"

I'm thinking John the Baptist gave Jesus one of these slack-jawed stares at the Jordan River. John is doing his stuff, preaching repentance and heralding the coming of the reign of heaven. People are coming to him and confessing their sins and receiving his baptism of repentance. John is baptizing sinners. But then Jesus arrives. Jesus is the one of whom John said, "*He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will*

baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” But this mighty one who is coming to judge all mankind for their sins does the unexpected; he asks to be baptized along with those who are confessing their sins.

You can almost hear the phrase, “Are you nuts?” as John responds. *“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”* Jesus has no sins to confess. He is the reign of heaven John has been talking about. He is the mighty judge. The idea that He would seek this baptism of repentance is ludicrous. And Jesus’ response seems almost to acknowledge the weirdness of His request. He is sort of telling John to allow the present bizarreness to happen because there are much bigger things going on than just the moment. *“Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”*

At first Jesus’ words may leave us confused, wondering how John and Jesus doing this thing works with “all righteousness.” But if you understand righteousness in the saving sense, the sense that Jesus has come to make the unrighteous righteous, it becomes clearer. Jesus’ mission to sinners at this time isn’t for judgment and condemnation of sinners, but to bring them righteousness that will save them in the judgment. *“A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.”* The justice, the righteousness Christ brings is that which builds up the humble and broken and weak. Christ comes to save. The psalmist sings in Psalm 71, *“My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all the day.”* The fulfilling of all righteousness Jesus speaks of is the fulfilling of God’s plan of salvation for mankind.

It is fitting that Jesus be baptized in the Jordan because Jesus became a man and came to earth to stand with sinners. Jesus has no sins to repent of, no sins to confess, but he became human to join with humanity to save them from their sins. Jesus stands in the Jordan with all those who are confessing their sins, knowing that soon He would be bearing those sins to the cross to make the terrible payment for them all. Jesus stands in and amongst the repenting Israel here receiving the same baptism they receive, but on the cross he hangs in place of them, receiving the just wrath of God in their stead. That strange act of love was yet to come, but at that moment in the Jordan Jesus says His strange baptism among sinners was a proper part of God’s plan to join the holy Christ to the fallen mankind. I doubt John fully understood, but he obeyed and Jesus was baptized right beside the repentant sinners of Israel.

Over the centuries a lot of learned people have written and theorized and preached about how our Christian baptism is linked to that of Christ. Some have said Christ in His baptism fulfills a type of legal requirement or sets the example or does a sanctifying of the waters of the Christian baptism to come. Martin Luther in his Large Catechism uses Christ’s baptism as an example of how we must honor Christian baptism saying, “For God Himself has honored it both by words and deeds. Furthermore, He confirmed it with miracles from heaven. Do you think it was a joke that, when Christ was baptized, the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended visibly, and everything was divine glory and majesty?”

Far be it from me to disagree with Dr. Luther and the church fathers. However, I think we should be careful about too closely linking our baptism with that of Jesus. For I think these are two differing movements. Christ’s baptism seems to be one of joining with sinful humanity. It is the event that begins His earthly ministry of reaching out to sinners, healing their ills, casting out their demons and preaching salvation. But the ministry inaugurated by this baptism is inextricable tied to human sin, it is a ministry which culminates in Christ being sin for us on the cross. This baptism links Christ to sinners, and begins the long walk to Calvary where Christ will

stand in for sinners and receive the condemnation of God sinners deserve. I think this is one big part of the reason the heavens open and God the Father says *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”* Christ in obedience to the Father has begun this identification with sinners which will reach fulfillment on the cross in Christ’s suffering and death for all sin. It is a link which takes Christ from life and glory and leads to shame and death.

Christian baptism, our baptism, is something else completely. Our baptism starts with the earthly and sinful and condemned and leads to life and glory. Our baptism starts at death—ours and Christ’s. *“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.”*

This is why each of us ought to be in awe of our baptism every day. This simple washing with water and the Word which many of us don’t even remember moves us from death to life. We need to stop and consider where our baptism takes us. It takes us to the cross where we stand in slack-jawed wonder at the bleeding and dying Christ, paying the ultimate price for our sins, fulfilling all righteousness for us, that through simple water and Word we would be freed from sin to be children of God. Through simple baptism we are given Christ’s death for us. It doesn’t seem quite fair. It kind of makes you want to question Jesus on the cross, to say “Are you nuts?” Doing this for me. Making it so simple. Simply giving this righteousness to me through a little water and Word.

The answer would be, “No. I’m love.” Christ is the obedient Son of our loving Abba Father God who demands justice and so Himself provided the perfect sacrifice to atone for all sin because of His love for us. Then in love He gifts us with saving faith in this sacrifice through His Holy Spirit and simple water and words.

That’s our loving God. His baptism showed how He was willing to move from glory and life to become sin and die on our behalf. Our baptism links us to that death so our sins are paid for there. Then in love our God raises us to new life with Christ.

“So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

Do this. Be this. Wake up every morning refreshed in your Holy Baptism knowing that you are washed and forgiven, dead to sin and alive to Christ. And as you go through your day in Christ, see if you can have some fun and make somebody’s head spin by doing this—When somebody greets you with a “How are you?” answer with “I’m baptized,” and see where that conversation takes you.

Amen