

Baptism of our Lord “Whose Baptism Is It Anyway” Matt 1 8

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

The first Sunday after Epiphany remembers the Baptism of our Lord when Jesus stood in the Jordan River and John the Baptist baptized him along with the multitudes who streamed there from Jerusalem and “all of Judea” as the Gospels say. We should notice that this feast is a bookend for the season of Epiphany along with the Feast of Transfiguration. Both of these days see white on the altar and feature a voice from heaven which declares Jesus to be the Son, beloved and worthy of our hearing.

Those words from heaven are really the central message or theme of the Epiphany season. Who was that child whom the Wise Men worshipped on bended knee with precious gifts? The Sundays which fall between the hearing of those words, are best understood as an exploration of that statement made by the Father. This carpenter from Nazareth is far more than He appears to our eyes. He is the Son of the Most High, the Logos, the Word, who has mysteriously and beautifully pitched his tent in the flesh of humanity.

We will see this Jesus doing all sorts of marvelous things, and finally, on the first Sunday of Lent, the words from the cloud will be put to the test in the Temptation. There, the evil one will cast them back at Jesus, “If you really are the Son of God, turn these loaves into bread...” Thus, the season bridges the time of Christmas and the Paschaltide or Easter. It reveals that the babe in the manger is much more than the humble child that He appears to be; He is the Son of God, sent to do battle with our ancient enemy and He wins the day. That battle will be joined in the season of Lent and Easter as Jesus ascends Golgotha’s cruel crest.

But for us there remains a real question about the Baptism of Jesus: What is He doing in that water? John’s own description of his baptism is that it is a baptism of the repentance of sins. If he really is the Son of God, Jesus has no sins to repent of. What is **He** doing in that water? Either He is not really the Son of God and this is all some horrid mistake, or it is a matter of sweetest Gospel. You can probably guess which of those options my personal preference is.

I opt for the Gospel thing. I believe that Jesus is in that river, repenting in my place, because even when it comes to repentance, I am a failure at meeting divine expectations.

In the waters of the Jordan, Mark and the other Gospel writers tell us that Jesus took on the sins of the whole world. In that sense, He belongs in the line with the rest of us penitents; in fact, He has far more reason to be there. He does not just carry those sins **lightly** or as some sort of an incidental part of his humanity, but as it says in Corinthians, God made him who knew no sin to **be** sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Hear that closely, Jesus not only took our sins, but He **became** sin for us so that we might become the very righteousness of God. He would carry that prickly burden, live that damned life to its bitter and dreadful end, hanging on a cross, when the Devil's tail twitched with glee and he thought he had won a victory over his enemy and our friend.

Of course, Easter puts a damper on Satan's party and gives heart to our celebrations every Sunday. Think back to Moses' day and the serpent upon the pole upon which whoever looked would be healed and saved from death. We are laying the necessary ground work for our celebration on Easter. This festival of Jesus Baptism has huge implications. If it is not the Son of God who ascends Calvary's sorrowful slope, our sins remain our own. If He does not die there, our sins return to us. But when He, God's only-begotten Son, takes our sins and goes all that way to that cross, our sins are forgiven, and life is restored. The Son of God has accomplished his task.

The Baptism of our Lord is a time which naturally gives us an occasion to remember our own Baptism. But the Baptism in which we were baptized is not of the same species as the baptism of Christ. John makes no claim that his baptism gives life or that it incorporates the baptized into the body of Christ. We heard Paul speak of our own Baptism today and the point of this passage is that we would be able to notice the differences. Indeed, we read at the beginning of Acts 19 (verses 1-6), Paul re-baptized those who had received the baptism of John.

Even though we are talking about two different sorts of baptism, they are also connected. Our Baptism is potent and effective because Jesus underwent this baptism. Our Baptism is not joining Christ in his **baptism** but simply joining **Him**. In that sense, they are connected, but not because they both share water, but because our washing has united us with Him who repented of the whole world's sins in Jordan's muddy waters.

And it is a subtle point, but we need to avoid the Baptist pit here. For the Baptists make no distinction between John's baptism and ours, insisting that **they** are simply continuing the baptism of John and our Baptism is simply a baptism of repentance and not a life-giving flood. We perceive that God's work of salvation proceeds from **His** initiative and work upon **us**. As St. Paul says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith...not by works, so that no one can boast."

All this can give us an occasion to address the whole issue of repentance and why we do it. It is unlikely that Advent really let us repent much, but now that Christmas is over and the New Year festivities are behind us, we are far more likely to be in a penitential mood. The weather is dark and cold, the Christmas bills are starting to show up in earnest, our resolutions have likely all been broken by this time. Penitence may well **be** on the mind of many people.

Too often we think that God forgives folks who repent, as if somehow our repentance made us **worthy** of that forgiveness. But this is simply the same theology that Luther fought against with indulgences. People of that time thought that they were earning God's favor. We have simply created another sort of indulgence with repentance.

This text shows us another much better and authentic reason to repent. We do not repent because this makes us somehow acceptable or more acceptable to God. God made us acceptable in Christ.

So, why should we repent if Jesus has repented fully and completely for us? Well, from the account of the Baptism of Christ, we repent because repenting makes us look more and more like the Jesus who stands in these waters today. He is perfectly repenting, something I will never quite get. But Jesus has already taken up his righteous life in each of us through Baptism.

Repentance is not us meeting the bar of God's approval, it is us being drawn into the very being which God has called forth in Baptism.

The thing is, we have a profound God problem, so deep we don't even have the ability to comprehend it. And therefore, we cannot even adequately repent of our own sin.

And we have a fundamental first article problem, a problem in admitting that we are God's creatures, and by our nature, his servants, that the stuff of this life, even life itself, does not really belong to us. We try to take ownership of something that is actually God's.

Unable to comprehend our own problems, our tendency is to think that we are largely OK, a little cosmetic work around the edges and we will be just fine. Fix our eyes on Jesus we say, not realizing we are spiritually blind. We want to touch up our gray hair, cover our blemishes, and smooth out our wrinkles, but fail to perceive the stench of death that exudes from the sins we keep within us.

Unchanged and unwilling to be changed, our lives bear the miserable fruit of strife, pain, and finally death. We realize something is terribly wrong with us, but we are not really willing to open that door and stare it straight in the face. It is just too terrible to contemplate. The only way it will happen is when things totally fall apart for us and we have no other choice.

But God is not really safe to be around. He keeps pursuing us. He tears open the heavens and has a way of showing up at inconvenient times. His prophets are not easy to get along with, they wear funny clothes and embarrass us. He says things we don't want to hear and cannot bear. And when his gaze falls on us, we turn away. He can see right through us. He makes us uncomfortable with ourselves.

This is why Jesus came into the world! He has picked up our slack – though our repentance is tepid and weak, and does not plumb the depths of our sin, He has repented for us and the rest of this world. He has born the burden we are incapable of bearing. He has taken up the heavy burden and has carried it to the last.

God's creative word did not stop on the first day of creation. He still is creating. He created us anew on the day of our Baptisms and He re-creates us every time we hear his word, confess and receive absolution, or receive the Lord's Supper. We cannot of our own reason or strength believe, but He creates that faith in us. Freed of the burden, raised to a new life in Christ, we are a different people. Our problems go deep, but so does the solution of Christ. This is no pat on the head and a nice encouraging word. This is a heart transplant, a mind transplant, a death and resurrection. This is strong stuff Jesus does today, but it is the stuff we need done. An eternity without radical change is not heavenly, but an eternity remade by Christ is sweet indeed.

And that eternity does not start in the future but starts right now. Freed of the burden of our sinful selves, we can indeed live a different sort of life. Having undergone the radical surgery of Christ, the complete solution, the cure is accomplished. I need not fear opening the door of my soul to Jesus. In fact, there is nothing in there that He does not already know about and for which He has not already died. The question is not whether He can deal with it, but whether we have thrown ourselves across that door to bar his entrance. He will not force His way in, but stands there today, gently pleading, that He might enter and fix all.

Knowing that the Jesus who entered those muddy Jordan waters that day, loves the people of this time and welcomes each of us, one at a time, into his loving embrace, we can take heart! For He shed his blood for us and unites us through Baptism into his death, so that we might rise with Him to newness of life.

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!