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Baptism of Our Lord
8 January 2012
Grace Lutheran Church, Wichita
Mark 1:4-11

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

The Baptism of Jesus is truly an Epiphany.

It's a revelation, an appearance, a manifestation of who this Jesus is.

At His Baptism in the Jordan by John, we find that this Jesus isn't just any ordinary man—
He is, in fact, God Himself, the Son, the second person of the Trinity.

St. Mark gives us the story of Jesus' Baptism this way:

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

**And when He came up out of the water,
immediately He saw the heavens being torn open
and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove.**

And a voice came from heaven,

‘You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased.’ (Mk 1:9-11)

Everything at the Baptism points to Jesus.

He comes out of the water.

The heavens open for *Him*.

The Spirit descends on *Him* like a dove.

And a voice from heaven says to *Him*,

“You are my beloved Son; with You I am well pleased.”

It's all about Jesus.

But Jesus is never alone.

The first person to join Him is the Spirit, coming in the form of a dove.

But why does the Spirit show Himself as a dove?

Is it, like Luther said, because the dove represents friendliness,
coming without wrath or anger or bitterness—a symbol of peace?

Or is it a symbol of divinity?

Among the ancient Greeks, doves were always pictured with Zeus.

Rather than these, I think that when those gathered around saw the dove, they remembered the dove back in Noah's day—

“Then Noah sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. But the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took her and brought her into the ark with him.

He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days and sent forth the dove, and she did not return to him anymore.” (Gen 8:8-12)

When the Dove didn't return, that meant creation was restored:
 they could come out of the ark and build homes and dwell in the land again.
 They could eat and rejoice and offer sacrifice and live.
 For us, all of this is done in Christ—for that's where the Spirit rests!

The Spirit comes in the form of a dove to remind you of the new life that Noah found when he let down the door of the ark and set foot on earth again.

And that dove, Noah's dove, brings us back to creation itself—our OT reading for today:
“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” (Gen 1:1-2)

The Holy Spirit hovered over the waters in creation.
 The Dove hovered over the waters of the flood.
 And now the Spirit comes down as a dove and rests upon Jesus in Holy Baptism.

And then we hear a voice from heaven.
“You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased.” (Mk 1:11)

These are the words of the loving, heavenly Father.
 They're words of joy and delight and pride.
 Words that proclaim to all that this man Jesus is the very Son of God.

They're also the same words God spoke long ago in Isaiah about the Suffering Servant:
“Behold my servant, whom I uphold, My chosen one, in whom My soul delights; I have put My Spirit upon Him.” (Isa 42:1)

So here we have before the eyes of all: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—
 all at the Baptism of Jesus.

But what does all this tell us about Jesus?
 Is it enough to simply know that He's God?
 Is that what God wants—to simply acknowledge this mysterious 3-in-1 sort of God?

Certainly not!
 And Mark gives us clues along the way!

What Mark wants us to know from this Baptism, is that this Jesus is *God for us!*
 God who becomes one of us, enters into this life with us, and then suffers for us.

We must notice the way it all begins:

“And when He came up out of the water, immediately He saw the heavens being torn open...” (Mk 1:10)—

the heavens: torn open, ripped apart, shredded.

The Greek word here in Mark’s Gospel is *skizo*:

that is, *split*, where we get our *schizophrenia*, having a split mind.

Mark only uses this word twice in his Gospel—

here, and at the crucifixion, when the curtain in the temple is torn in two (15:38).

And so this ripping open of heaven, this violent rending of the division between God and man, reveals to us God’s desire *for us*.

No longer is there any separation.

No longer division.

No longer is God on one side and we are on the other.

Here, at Christ’s Baptism, as also at His crucifixion,

it’s no longer just God or just us, but God and us, together!

And Jesus wouldn’t have it any other way.

He longs for us.

He goes wherever He must for us—

into our leprosy and blindness;

into our darkness and hiddenness of heart;

into our prison cells and our guilty consciences—

even into death, *for us*.

“Where our sins are is where He is.”¹

This God, made manifest at the Baptism of Jesus, isn’t just God for God’s sake—

He’s God for *our sake; for us!*

And while this Baptism is one of the great Epiphanies,

one of the great manifestations, appearances, “A Ha’s!”—

the greatest revelation of who God is *for us*,

is on the cross.

And in your baptism, all of this comes to you also.

You enter into His death and His resurrection,

His life and His ascension,

You enter into Christ Himself, into the life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit—

and so the heavenly Father says to you:

“You are My beloved Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased.”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

¹ Norman E. Nagel, 44.