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Baptism of Our Lord
16 January 2011
Grace Lutheran Church, Wichita
Matthew 3:13-17

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

Nothing is more basic and foundational to the Christian faith than Baptism.
Everything in the Christian life begins and ends with Baptism.

But what is Baptism, and why bother?

The answer to these is in our Gospel reading for today.

Today Jesus,
the Messiah, the Christ,
the Son of David and Son of Abraham,
our Immanuel and Lord,
gets baptized.

He comes to John the Baptizer,
steps into the flowing waters of the Jordan River,
and asks John to say the word that He might be baptized.

Now, those of you who know your Catechism should be a bit puzzled here—

“If Baptism

‘works the forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe,’ (Mk 16:16)

and if Baptism

‘is a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of new birth in the Holy Spirit’ (Titus 3:5)

then what on earth is Jesus doing getting baptized?!”

And you wouldn’t be alone here—

John the Baptist knows his catechism, too:

“John tried to prevent Him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?’” (Mt 3:14)

Here we have a bit of a problem:

Jesus is the sinless, perfect, promised Son of the Father.

He’s the second person of the Holy Trinity,
the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,
the Christ, our Lord.

Jesus has no need for baptism!

Something else must be going on here.

While Baptism normally wipes away sin,

cleanses what’s filthy,

and gives life and strength to what’s weak and dead—

with Jesus, things are different.

When John argues that he shouldn't be the one baptizing,
 Jesus gives an odd response:
“Let it be so now, for by doing thus we fulfill all righteousness” (Mt 3:15).

Somehow, in this baptism **“all righteousness”** is fulfilled.
 Somehow, when the sinless, spotless, holy Christ steps into the waters of baptism,
“all righteousness” is fulfilled.

Now, just so we're clear, “righteousness” means something different for God than it does for us.

For us, “righteousness” is something we think we can achieve or earn or do.
 It's a quality of how good we are.

For God, though, it's just the opposite—
 “righteousness” is the quality of how low He can become for us.
 It's a word not of achievement or merit, but of giving and bestowing.
 What makes God righteous is His complete self-*giving*.
 Everything He has is yours, and that's the way He wants it.

And so when Jesus gets baptized by John, **“all righteousness”** is fulfilled—
 Jesus gives Himself over to us.

And this is what makes Jesus' Baptism so unique and special.
 When Jesus enters His baptism,
 He enters yours as well.

Now things should start to make more sense—
 Jesus,
 the clean,
 holy,
 spotless,
 perfect,
 sinless,
 God and Man,
 enters a water full of impurities, sicknesses, diseases, and death.

By coming into the Baptismal water He takes on and receives everything that washed off of you.

Even as an infant, which most of you were at your baptism, it was quite a load of filth that got washed off.

It was your lusts and diseases,
 your hurts and pains and gossip,
 the good works you didn't do and the hideously bad works you did;
 it was your sin, your original sin given from Adam,
 that washed off in those waters.

When you were baptized, you were forgiven:
 that is, you were cleansed, healed, delivered, rescued, washed, and purified.
 You were given life and hope and health and joy.
 Your sin was paid for, taken by another.

But not so for Christ.

No, when Jesus was baptized,
 He took on lusts and diseases,
 hurts and pains and gossip,
 failed efforts and sinful ignorance,
 He took on your sin—all of it—
 and became for you the Greatest Sinner (*maximus peccator*)!¹
 He became death.

You can't get any filthier than Jesus.
 Your sin doesn't compare.
 Because the only sin you carry around is your own.

But Jesus, He carried the sin of the whole world!
 It was yours and mine,
 your father's and mother's,
 Hitler's and Stalin's and Bin Laden's.

He took the leper's leprosy,
 the lame's disability,
 the deaf's lack of hearing,
 and the blind's poor eyes.

He became the leper, the lame, the deaf, and the blind.
 He became the sick and the poor, the suffering and the downtrodden.
 Jesus became the *Greatest Sinner*—for you!

And what happened to you?
 Well in those waters, you drowned.
 Your sin was buried and then you rose up.

You came up out of those waters as a new person,
 without sin, sickness, burden, or death.
 You came up out of those waters as the Father's Beloved *Son*.

What goes for Jesus goes for you.
“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.’” (Mt 3:16-17)

¹ Martin Luther, *Great Galatians Commentary* (1535). LW 26:281.

You might not remember it so well—
 your baptism was quite some time ago—
 but all of this happened for you too!

The water hit your forehead,
 the pastor said,
“I baptize you into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”
 and then the heavens opened!
 The Spirit came and rested upon you, making a home in your own body, calling it
 His temple (1 Cor 6:19).
 And the Father said to you,
“You are My beloved Son.”

That’s what Baptism is—
 it’s becoming the Son of God.

And whatever properly belongs to the Son,
 belongs to you:
 life,
 salvation,
 joy,
 peace,
 kindness,
 and self-giving.

Baptism is the Lord’s way of making you His own,
 of giving you all His gifts, forgiving all your sins.

Baptism is our Lord’s way of taking what’s yours and giving you what’s His.

And in that,
 in that complete self-giving,
“all righteousness is fulfilled.”

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