

It is a remarkable, majestic scene, is it not? The incarnate Son of God comes up from the water and the heavens are opened. The voice of the Father sounds forth: **“This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”** The Spirit of God descends like a dove and rests on Jesus. It’s quite the contrast to when God had previously appeared and spoken to His people. At Sinai there’s certainly the voice of God. But it’s the commands of the Law which He utters, and the voice is accompanied by thunder, flashes of lightning, the sound of trumpets and the mountain smoked. Understandably before this sight and these sounds **“the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die’”** (Ex 20:18-19).

But today God is not enshrouded in mysterious figures as He so often appeared to the patriarchs. Here the God acclaimed by the seraphim as the thrice-holy One is shown clearly in all three Persons. All three Persons are seen and testify to this moment. And there is no terror. There is no fear. The holy Trinity speaks, He is seen, and it is a moment of wonder and joy.

But why? Who is it a moment of wonder and joy for? Why is Jesus even there? That’s the very question John the Baptist asks. Like the people of Israel at Sinai, the people of John’s day were sinners. They needed the call to repent. That is what the voice of God at Sinai shows. God speaks His holy Ten Commands aloud, He gives that perfect summary of His good will for His creation for all the people to hear, and there is terror. When God’s word of Law thunders forth, when His just demands are simply held up for what they plainly say, we might not hear thunder or see lightning, but it should sound and flash in our hearts. Where His Word and judgment are concerned, God alone must be and shall be in the right. And even if each of the commandments of God did not convict us, as any serious self-examination will show, His Word says that all human beings are sinners before Him. **“There is no one righteous, no, not one”** (Rom 3:10). The first task of the Holy Spirit is to convict of sin. To convince us, to bring us to our senses and realize that we are sinners. That is what God’s Law proclaims and reveals. This is what we sing in the great hymn of the Lutheran Reformation, *Salvation Unto Us Has Come*:

The Law reveals the guilt of sin And makes us conscience stricken.

John preached that. He came preaching **“Repent,”** and **“Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins”** (Matt 3:2, 5-6). They come confessing their sins, their need for the Messiah to come and save them. Luke tells us that the baptism John administered was for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism is for sinners. They need it. But John knows, as well as we, that Jesus is no sinner. He has no sin to confess and be absolved of. He has no need of forgiveness. Even right before His sentence to death upon the cross, Pilate proclaims again and again, **“I find no guilt in this man...I have found in him no guilt deserving death”** (Lk 23:4, 22). So why does Jesus come to be baptized?

We can ask another question. Why does the Father proclaim Jesus’ identity? The Lord knows who His Father is at age 12 when He remains in the temple. The Son knows He must be among the things of His Father. He is already God and Lord of all creation. He does not need to have this proclaimed for His own sake. So why does all this happen? Why is Jesus baptized if He alone is the only man who does not need it? Why does the Father proclaim the Son’s identity? Why is the Spirit shown descending upon Jesus? For whom is this done? What does this tell us?

That it is all done for you. The name Jesus means “the LORD saves.” The angel who appears to Joseph in Matthew chapter 1 says that He is given that name because **“He will save His people from their sins”** (Matt 1:21). Today Jesus, the LORD who saves His people from their sins, comes to the place where His people are confessing their sins. Today He begins His public work of salvation from sin. He has no sin of His own, but here is where He takes up all the sin of the world upon Himself. Here is where He carries and bears it all the way to the cross where He will undergo the baptism of fire and wrath, as He says later in His ministry, **“I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is My distress until it is accomplished”** (Lk 12:50). It is after this, our Lord’s Baptism, that John sees Jesus and cries out: **“Behold, the Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world”** (Jn 1:29).

Jesus is not baptized because He needs it. He is baptized because we need it. He is baptized into us, into our sin, to take upon Himself our iniquities and sins, and to die for them. He joins Himself to the water, so that by the water we are then joined to Him. How can water do that? It's certainly not just water, but it is the word of God in and with the water that does this. The God who appears here today at Jesus' baptism, is the very God into whose name Jesus commands us to be baptized. The Triune God who appeared at this baptism is present by His Word and Name in baptism today, to do and say the very same of us.

That is why the Father says what He does of Jesus. So that you might know that this Man, Jesus Christ, is the One who bears our sins, that He is baptized into us, into our sins to die for them. This is what the righteousness of God is: that the sinless Son of God, who has no need for forgiveness, takes your sin upon Himself and dies for it. This is the great desire of the Father in heaven. It pleases Him. He delights in His Son. And in Christ, joined to Him, clothed in Him, you are the same.

You are beloved, you are pleasing, you are a son. That doesn't mean there's some mystical gender reassignment going on here, or that in heaven we will all be males. It means that before God you have the status of firstborn son. Everything that belongs to the Son is yours. Everything that He possesses by nature, as the divine, eternal, beloved, spotless Son of God, is given to you by grace. It is given in Baptism. That is what St. Paul means when he writes to the Galatians, "**For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.**" That is what he means when he writes to the Romans that by baptism "we have been united with" Christ's death and resurrection. Everything Christ's death and resurrection accomplished is given to you. And it is given in Baptism.

Much of American Christianity rejects what the Bible actually teaches about baptism. First and foremost, they say that baptism it is not the work of God but of man. And then because baptism is seen as something that man does, something he must decide to do, it cannot then be for infants and small children, and it cannot save, it does not actually do anything. But hear these words of St. Paul in his letter to Titus: "**He**" that is, God "**saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ, our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying**" (Titus 3:5-8). The New Testament only speaks of one washing, one baptism: that of water and the Spirit. And who is it that is at work through the washing? Not man, but God. It is God who saved us. It is God who baptizes. Oh sure, He uses a human hand. And it's a human voice you see. But it's done in His name and at His command. It is He who bestows the benefits of forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, and eternal salvation. He gives us His Holy Spirit as we are joined to His Son.

None of this is a symbol. Look all the passages in the New Testament about baptism, you will not find the word "symbol" or "represents." St. Paul never says, "Well obviously baptism is *like* a dying and rising, but it isn't *actually*." He doesn't say "Baptism is a *picture* of being clothed with Christ." No, it is all quite real. It really happened when you were baptized. You were dressed in Jesus. His death on the cross for you, what it accomplished, is delivered to you. His victory over the grave is made yours. The Holy Spirit who descended upon Him, creates faith and dwells in you. And the Father's words of joy and delight are said of you. He has washed away your sins, and lets you, His little child into His kingdom. How? Why? Because that is what baptism does. That is what Jesus says and promises. There you are born not of the flesh, not the will, but of God. That is where you die to sin and live to God.

This is the basis of your life as a Christian. This is who you are. Just as your name identifies you to friends and introduces you to strangers, your baptism is your identity before God. You are who He says you are: a washed, cleansed, forgiven, and beloved child. This is the source and power for your daily living. When you wake up, remember that you begin the new day as God's child, with His promise and blessing. As you go through your day, when you would be tempted into sin against God, or lured into love of the self rather than of your neighbor, remember to whom you are joined. You guard and are careful for your most valuable clothing, cautious to avoid any spill, stain, or tear. The garment you have received from God in your baptism is far more valuable. Do not join the body God has claimed as His own to sin. Do not defile your eyes, your lips, or your mind which are consecrated to God, with that which is unholy, unkind, unhelpful, and untrue. And when the day is done, as you call to mind the day's many sins and weaknesses, you pray for forgiveness, and in faith you cling to those same promises God has made to you. In His Son, because of what the Lord Jesus Christ has done, you are forgiven; God's own child, baptized into Christ, a child of paradise!