

Sermon for the Baptism of Our Lord – Matthew 3:13-17  
In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today the Church celebrates the feast of the Baptism of our Lord. With this Holy day, the inevitable question ever looms: Why was Jesus baptized? St. Mark tells us near the end of His Gospel, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." From this verse we can correctly conclude that Baptism works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation. So what need does the sinless Son of God have for the forgiveness of sins in Baptism? Why would the All-powerful God need to be rescued from death and the devil? What need does the Alpha and the Omega, yes, the God without beginning or end, have of eternal salvation? In sum, why was Jesus baptized?

One common answer is that Jesus had to be baptized as our example. And I can hardly think of a worse answer. For starters, how well did you follow His example? Who here was baptized in the Jordan River? Who was baptized by John? Who was baptized at 30 years of age? Those are only the details of the event. But let's take it a little further: Have you followed Jesus' example in keeping your tongue from telling lies and gossip, while always building up others' reputations? Have you kept your hands from theft and gluttony, while always seeking the good of your employer or employees? Have you kept your thoughts from wishing harm on others, while always thinking the best of their motives? Jesus did! He lived the perfect life! And if following the Lord's example is our ticket to salvation, I'm afraid we all fall woefully short.

So what is the correct answer? If not as an example to us, why was Jesus baptized? Let's return to the words of our Lord in today's Gospel for the answer: "Let [My baptism] be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." So there you have it: Christ was baptized to fulfill all righteousness. But what does that mean? Our flesh thinks it means we are to share in some of the spotlight of the fulfilling all righteousness. We say, "Of course God does the work, I wouldn't deny that! But it's incumbent upon me to make myself a worthy recipient of His grace. After all, the fulfilling all righteousness is a two way street. Sure God starts the ball rolling but I've got to keep it going by my love for Him and good works for my neighbor." And so our sinful flesh attempts to continually nudge out a little room in the fulfillment-of-all-righteousness spotlight, until finally, we're the star of the show!

But Christ would not have it so. Our Lord said, "Let [My baptism] be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." So fulfilling of all righteous involves Christ and also involves us, to be sure. Yet, when it comes to fulfilling all righteousness, Christ is the only active one. Our involvement is purely passive. We are helpless – being condemned for our law-breaking, being cursed for our transgressions, being dead in our sins – we can take no active roll. We can do nothing to contribute to our salvation!

The work of God alone in our baptism cannot be emphasized enough. Why? Because quite naturally we believe that we can be rid of sin and gain God's grace by our own devices. We imagine that our likeable personalities, our politeness, and our flattery of others will cover the multitude of our sins and earn our forgiveness. We think, "Even though I am a sinner, there is no need to worry, I can take care of the situation; I will do this or that to the praise of God and to the well-being of the person I have wronged. Both God and my neighbor will accept it."

However, that which is our own way of "fixing things," no matter how good and holy it may seem, is nothing and worthless in the sight of God. Our works are utterly dead and

useless! If we could atone for sin, if we could drive out death by our own human powers, Christ's becoming man would be unnecessary, His baptism would be pointless, His death for our sins would be in vain!

By works of the law no human being will be justified in God's sight. True justification comes only through Christ who took the sin of the whole world upon Himself; He became a curse for us and thus redeemed us from the curse of sin and death. Because He became a curse by dying on a cross, our sins have been removed from us and are placed upon Christ's back. Sins can only be in one place: they cannot be upon us and Him simultaneously – they must be placed upon Him. No one can cover the cost of his sins through his own righteousness. Atonement and redemption from sin belongs to Christ alone. Our works are not Christ. Our works are not His body and blood sacrificed for our sins. Our works are not true God and true man, who bears the sins of the world. He takes our sins upon Himself by no righteousness of ours. He drowns our sins and obliterates them in baptism and the Cross. He gave His body for us and poured out His blood for the forgiveness of our sins. If you believe this, you are righteous. And even when in weakness you fall into sin, it shall not be counted against you, because Christ takes your sin upon Himself.

This forgiveness of sins does not come without payment. It came at a great cost, but the payment is not ours. It cost Christ his body. It cost Christ his blood. It cost Christ His very life. No sacrifice is acceptable to pay for our sin except the one sacrifice of Christ. He bears the sins of us all and kills all sins in His body by death.

St. Matthew recounts the sights and sounds of our Lord's Baptism in vivid detail as we heard earlier in today's Gospel: "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.'" This whole scene is quite a bit different from what we would witness in Holy Baptism in our day. We see nothing occur that is particularly magical or extravagant. Baptism is only water, that's what our eyes tell us. We don't see such great and glorious things. We see nothing except water, and we hear nothing except words. But the Word of faith shows what no eye can see and tells what no ear can hear: God Himself is present, doing the work. Dr. Luther would say it this way in his catechetical hymn on Holy Baptism (#406, which we just sang), "All that the mortal eye beholds/Is water as we pour it./Before the eye of faith unfolds/The pow'r of Jesus' merit./For here it sees the crimson flood/To all our ills bring healing;/The wonders of His precious blood/The love of God revealing./Assuring His own pardon." Therefore, when we view a baptism in this house of the Lord, we should accustom ourselves to look upon it with eyes of faith and to interpret the glorious revelation and divine radiance and splendor which shown forth from above at the baptism of Christ at the very baptism we witness. In Baptism, all righteousness is fulfilled because Christ's righteousness becomes ours.

Whenever someone is baptized, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is present there. Whenever someone is baptized, heaven rejoices over the fact that our sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ. Because of His death, there is no more wrath for sinners, but only grace, unalloyed. Why? Because as the Father's voice sounded forth for Christ at His Baptism, even so His voice sounded forth for you at your baptism: "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠