

Grace Lutheran Church  
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The Baptism of Our Lord – Matthew 3:13-17

Let us pray...  
Christ, when for us you were baptized,  
God's Spirit on you came,  
as peaceful as a dove,  
and yet as urgent as a flame.

Baptize us with your Spirit, Lord;  
your cross on us be signed,  
that likewise in God' service  
we may perfect freedom find. (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, 304)  
Amen

The Baptism of our Lord. It's a fascinating event, a fascinating story. But, just what is it that we're celebrating today? Or, perhaps more accurately, what *should* we be celebrating? A word, first, about the Biblical story, then a word about you and me.

First, the biblical account of Jesus' baptism. There's something paradoxical about it. We call it "the baptism of our Lord," but the baptism itself only takes a few words. The scripture is clear. Jesus was baptized by John. It's among the most certain historical facts in the Gospel tradition. But notice what all four Gospel writers do with it.

It begins Mark's straightforward account. Jesus was baptized. The heavens opened. The Spirit descended. The Father spoke (Mark 1:9-11) But, once the story got around the early church was perplexed. Why? Maybe because those first Christians thought it a clear contradiction for the sinless Jesus to be baptized for the remission of his sins. Maybe they were uncomfortable with the notion that somehow, Jesus was subordinate to John.

So, what do the other three Gospel writers do? Matthew tries to soften it. He introduces an explanatory dialogue between Jesus and John. He mentions the actual baptism with a simple participle, “having been baptized.” (Matthew 3:16) “Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus [also] had been baptized and was praying, the heavens opened.” (Luke 3:21) And, John – he’s so embarrassed by the whole thing, he hardly mentions it. He has the Baptist hailing Jesus as the Lamb of God, the Baptist making it quite clear that after him, John, there comes one who ranks ahead of him. (John 1:29-34)

At any rate, today’s Gospel has a different focus. All four gospel writers have a different focus, for that matter. Only later in the Christian tradition will Jesus baptism become a model for Christian baptism. Only later, would Jesus baptism be seen as an Epiphany of the Trinity – a revelation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit active together. So, what is the bible focus? The person of Jesus. Who is he? Well, before he begins his public ministry, it’s imperative to be clear about who he is and why he is significant.

How does Matthew do it? He tells us, “the heavens are opened.” This means that communication between heaven and earth is opened, communication between God and humankind. This possibility is made concrete when the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus and the heavenly voice speaks. All three images – heaven opening, Spirit descending, voice speaking – set the stage for the question, “Who is this Jesus?”

And, the answer? “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased. “ (John 3:17) It’s a kind of knowing wink from eternity to our First Lesson, “this is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; He will bring forth justice to the nations “(Isaiah 42:1) My Son, my servant – This unique Son of God is to be a unique Servant, the Suffering Servant of God. In this unexpected sense, he is to be the Messiah. He is the servant who, “Will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth...” according to Isaiah. (42:4)

Splendid scriptural stuff, isn’t it? But, so what? How does it touch you and me?

One way is seen in the linking of the words from heaven in Matthew to the word of God in Isaiah. For you see, in your baptism you were, in effect addressed by the same words of the Lord, “here is my servant, whom I uphold my chosen in whom I delight. I have put my Spirit upon her [upon him]; she [he] will bring forth justice to the nations.”

In that recognition there are three words that challenge us – justice, servant, and suffering.

The justice referred to here is not just the justice that is human – giving each man, woman, child, what they can claim as a right – adequate food, decent housing, fitting education, humane work, respect for their dignity as images of God. Over and above this is the justice that is divine. By that I mean fidelity to relationships that stem from a covenant. A fidelity that is always faithful to God’s promises. A fidelity that must be ours, that introduces a fresh motivation, compels us to treat each man or woman as a brother or sister, to treat the downtrodden and marginalized as if we were standing in their shoes. A fidelity that inspires us to love our enemies as Jesus loved them, as Jesus has loved us. A fidelity that makes our own the mission of Jesus.

The second challenge reminds of Jesus words to the Twelve, “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28) Being a servant is your privilege and mine as disciples of Jesus. The problem is that it’s not easy to see ourselves as servant, to act as a servant. We live in positions of power. We make decisions that affect the lives of others. We haven’t had to live powerless, begging for the food we eat or unable to discover decent work or being anxious without health insurance or agonizing over our ill-fed children. Most of us haven’t been in that position. And most of us won’t be called to live like that. But what all of us are called to, I believe, is to share, *in some way*, the suffering of the less privileged.

Which brings us to the third demand – suffering. As I look back over six decades, I can hardly claim to have suffered. Sure, I have agonized – over affronts to my pride and assaults to my ego, over pulled hamstrings and sagging biceps, over a receding hairline and an expanding waistline.

But that’s nothing like the suffering that affects parents whose children are ill clothed. The suffering that wastes the cancer-ridden and AID’s afflicted. The suffering that agonizes the homeless and helpless. The suffering that torments the drug addicted. The hundreds of sufferings of the flesh and spirit that threaten to dehumanize God’s images on earth.

You and I need to ceaselessly recall what the Gospels keep repeating about Jesus – he had compassion. Its literal meaning is “to suffer with.” It means to feel as another feels.

Have I strayed from Jesus baptism? I think not, not really. You see, your baptism reveals your identity, it tells the world who you are. You are, like Jesus a servant sent to be “a light to the nations, to open eyes that are blind, to bring out prisoners from the dungeons, from the prison those who sit in darkness. (Isaiah 42:6, 7)

Folks, the occasion of your baptism may one day slip from your memory, you might forget the date, lose the certificate, but you will have lost little. Once baptized the forgiveness of sins are yours, a new identity is yours, and a child of God you will always be. And, as such, there is always the tasks to which you are called and the Holy Spirit to empower you in the fulfilling of those tasks.

The season of Epiphany focuses on the worship of Jesus in whom God is made manifest for us. The revelation of his divine sonship begins with a baptism. The revelation to us also typically begins with a baptism, with our baptism. For, when we are baptized, we too receive the Spirit. We too are identified as beloved children of God. We are baptized with Christ and into Christ so that God’s plan of justice might be fulfilled in us and through us.

Isn’t it so?