

# THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

ANNO † DOMINI 2022

Matthew 3:13-17

*Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 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."*

Epiphany is more than just a day, but like Christmas, it is an entire *season* of the Church Year. It began on Thursday with the celebration of the revelation of the mystery of Christ, which is that Jesus is not just for those of a specific bloodline, the Jews, but He is for *all* mankind. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and are in desperate need of a Savior; and, thanks be to God, we have one, who partook of the same flesh and blood shared by all human beings, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Like those pagan sorcerers from the east we know as the Wise Men, we deserve nothing but God's eternal wrath and punishment, but God in His mercy has led us by the bright star of His Word to know our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to receive His gifts of grace, and to shine like the Son in the kingdom of our heavenly Father.

But there is more than one epiphany in Epiphany. Thirty years after the Magi's visit, Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized by His cousin John, and John is understandably confused by this. He says, "I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" John's baptism, we are told by both the Evangelists Mark and Luke, was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It was not the same as our Baptism, which is a blessed flood and a lavish washing away of sin, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit, but it only gave the commandment to repent. Forgiveness would come later, when the One who is mightier than John would come and baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Well, here He is, wielder of the winnowing fork—and He wants to get into the water with sinners! Are you kidding? "I need to be baptized by You," says John. "You don't *have* any sin. You don't *need* to repent." But Jesus insists. And the question is, Why? Why did Jesus travel nearly 20 miles from His hometown of Nazareth in Galilee and condescend to be baptized?

There are a couple of reasons. First, as Jesus says to John, it was "to fulfill all righteousness." Righteousness is the fulfillment of all the commandments. As God says in Leviticus, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (19:2). Our perfect

God expects perfection, that is, flawless obedience to His Word. Sadly, He doesn't get it. Because we have all inherited the sin of Adam, we all fall short of the goal. We *sin*. We have other gods, profane God's holy name, despise His Word, anger our authorities, murder, lie, cheat and steal. We have the law. We know the commandments. We know what God expects. But we are not righteous. Not even close. No one is, no, not one.

Which is why Christ was born under the law. He was subjected to it in order to fulfill it, to fulfill all righteousness. How is this related to His baptism? It was commanded by God: John said, "He [God] sent me to baptize with water" (John 1:33). Luke notes in a parenthetical that the Pharisees and lawyers, by not being baptized by John, rejected the purpose of God for themselves (7:30). So, if righteousness is obedience to God, and God sent John to baptize, then it was fitting for Christ to be washed as well, to get into the water with sinners, just as He was circumcised, offered sacrifice, kept the Sabbath and observed Jewish feasts, like the Passover. True obedience was His path, and with His baptism of repentance in the Jordan, the sinless Son of God remained sinless.

What did He do with that righteousness? He took it to the cross and exchanged it for our sin. He became sin who knew no sin, owning up to all our misdeeds. The commandments were like a debt, which we needed to pay; and since we did not, death came to collect us. But Christ, having compassion on us, paid the debt Himself, doing what was necessary in order to release us who were unable to pay. He was given into death that we might not die eternally. He fulfilled *every* righteousness, so that we would see that there is nothing left for us to do. It is finished. Payment has been made in full. Sins are forgiven.

And in our Baptism, instituted by Christ Himself at His ascension, we become righteous. We receive a reputation that is not our own. As St. Paul writes in Galatians 3, we who were baptized into Christ have "put on" Christ (v. 27). We are clothed with the robe of His righteousness that covers all our sin. We are holy, as the Lord our God is holy, called out of darkness into His marvellous light. Baptism now saves you, who could not save yourself. It doesn't *replace* Jesus saving you, it *is* Jesus saving you, crucifying your old flesh with Him and raising you up to newness of life. It is freedom from guilt, victory over Satan, and life from everlasting death. It is a treasure worth more than any.

And we may be certain of that because of the second reason Jesus was baptized: to make Himself known. Until this time, Christ was not known to the people. Only the angels and a few people knew Him from when He was born. So when asked about the Christ, John told the people, "among you stands One you do not know" (John 1:26). In fact it seems not even *John* knew Jesus as the Messiah until that day, telling us in John 1,

“I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel” (v. 31). Accordingly, the Holy Spirit did not descend on Christ as an infant in the manger, where very few would have seen, but as a man in the river, as if to point Him out to the masses, saying, “This is the One. This is your Hope. There is salvation in no one else.”

The Spirit descended on Him as a dove. As we see in the Scriptures, where there is reconciliation with God there is often a dove, as in the flood of Noah, where the dove brought the olive branch—a sign of peace with God and of the end of the flood. So, too, at Jesus’ baptism the Spirit takes the form of a dove, and not some other creature, in order to signal peace and an end to the hostility between God and man in God’s beloved Son. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him with whom the Father is well pleased (John 3:18).

This, by the way, is one of the only places in all of Scripture where we see all three persons of the Godhead, the Holy Trinity, appear *simultaneously*: the Father in heaven, the Son in the water, and the Holy Spirit as a dove. “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). But the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Holy Spirit is another. There is not one person appearing in three different forms—that’s Modalism, Patrick! But we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance. And that’s not just a bunch of mumbo jumbo. That Jesus Christ is both true God and true man is vitally important for our redemption. No one else could ransom sinners. No one else could keep the law. No one else could conquer death. There is salvation in no one else, because no one else has what it takes to save us. In Christ alone do we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

And so, in the waters of the Jordan, as we sang earlier, Jesus’ true worth and work were shown (LSB 404:1). He was revealed to us as the Christ, God’s Anointed, chosen to save His people from their sins. He was revealed to us as the Son of God, Immanuel, God with us in our suffering. And there at the font, God revealed His great love for *you*, blessing you in Christ with every spiritual blessing, even as He chose you in Him before the foundation of the world, that you should be holy and blameless before Him (Eph. 1:3-4).

Today the Epiphany continues. You are baptized into Christ, who was baptized in order to be your Redeemer. To Him, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all glory now and forever. Amen.

*Soli Deo gloria*