

“Christ’s Baptism and Our Baptism”

Matthew 3:13-17

Sermon for the Baptism of Our Lord 2022

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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When John the Baptist was baptizing people in the Jordan River, he was a little surprised when he saw Jesus coming to be baptized. The people who were coming to John to be baptized came “confessing their sins” (Mat. 3:6).

But John had said much different things about Jesus. Of Jesus John said, “I am not worthy to carry His sandals” (Mat. 3:11). John also said, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Mat. 3:11). And He also said this about Jesus: “The winnowing fork is in His hands and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, and the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire” (Mat. 3:12). In other words, John was testifying by the word of God that Jesus would have all of the power and authority of God’s judgment over every human being in His hands.

To be able to do that, Jesus would have to not be subject to God’s judgment Himself. Jesus would have to be without sin to be the one who baptizes us in the Holy Spirit and fire. But now He is coming to John to be baptized.

Imagine that you were upon the riverbank. You see a long line of people coming to John at the Jordan. They are confessing their sins. They go down into the water and are baptized by him. And there stands Jesus, in the long line of people who need to confess their sins. He is in the line with them. He is in the line with you and me.

So, it is Jesus’s turn. He comes up to John. John realizes it is Jesus. Jesus was starting to make His way into the water. But John was trying to prevent Jesus. “Wait a second Jesus,” he says. “I need to be baptized by You. You should be the one baptizing me. And have you come to me to be baptized” (Mat. 3:14)?

The sinner should not be baptizing the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. The sinner should not be baptizing the one who has all power and authority of God’s judgment. The sinner who needs to have the change of heart and mind to turn toward God should not be baptizing the One the sinner should be turning toward.

And yet, Jesus came to be baptized with John’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; He came in the long line of sinners. Look who Jesus is numbered with; with regular old corrupted humanity. The Pharisees stand afar off from the line of sinners coming to be baptized by John. But not Jesus. He joins them who have not loved God as they ought; who have not loved their neighbor as they ought. Yet, who recognize this and don’t like it. They want to be right with God in humility and God’s forgiveness. So they come with the change of heart for the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus says to John, “Permit it for now. That is go ahead and baptize me. It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Mat. 3:15).

Fulfilling all righteousness. What does this mean? “Fulfilling” means to do what is completely required; to bring it about; to make it complete, lacking nothing.

But what does righteousness mean? There are generally two ways to take righteousness in the Scriptures. One way we could say involves recognizing what God requires of us and doing it. This is righteousness under the law. But this is not the righteousness Jesus is speaking about here. This is because Jesus is being numbered with sinners here.

Here, Jesus is talking about that other kind of righteousness. It is the righteousness by which God saves us. Psalm 31:1-2 speaks of this kind of righteousness: “In You, O LORD, I put my trust: Let me never be ashamed; *Deliver* me in Your *righteousness*. Bow down Your ear to me, *Deliver* me speedily; Be my rock of refuge, a fortress of defense to save me” (Psa. 31:1-2 NKJV). The righteousness spoken of here is that by which God delivers the one who looks to Him for deliverance.

The Apostle Paul also speaks of this kind of righteousness of God as the righteousness by which God justifies us through faith. It is the righteousness of God in which He regards us as righteous. In Romans 1:17 the Apostle says that in the Gospel “the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith” (Rom. 1:17). He goes on to say that “now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed” (Rom. 3:21). This is the righteousness of God which is through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:22). Paul also speaks of this righteousness when he says that “to Him who . . . believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness” (Rom. 4:5).

So the righteousness Jesus is talking about to John the Baptist does not have to do with God’s righteous requirements under the law by which we would be righteous if we did them. Rather, it is God’s saving righteousness in Jesus, the righteousness by which He delivers us by grace.

This kind of righteousness has to do with God being faithful to Himself in His promises and grace to make a way of salvation for the sinners. It has to do with God being faithful to the person who trusts in God to save and deliver. This is how this righteousness is a saving righteousness.

But then just how does Jesus appearing there in the long line of sinners to be baptized by John show the saving righteousness of God? Isaiah tells us in this simple and beautiful sentence, “He was numbered with transgressors” (Isa. 53:12d). He numbered Himself with transgressors, being innocent Himself. That way His righteousness could be credited to the sinner, who in sorrow over sin looks for salvation in Him.

Now being numbered with transgressors He can do three things. First, He can do battle with the one who taught us how to sin: the devil himself. Matthew brings this into focus immediately after Jesus’s baptism in chapter 4 verse 1. There Matthew says: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Mat. 4:1 NKJV). Being numbered with transgressors, Jesus had to do what Adam and Eve, and you and I, have not done the way we ought; though Jesus now teaches us and strengthens us to grow in this day by day. He had to defeat the devil by not giving in to his temptations. Thus, Jesus fulfilled all righteousness in our place.

Second, Jesus was numbered with transgressors so He could take all our sins in His body on the tree, as the Apostle Peter says (1 Peter 2:24). But Isaiah had said this before: “All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way, and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6). The Apostle Paul says, “God made Him who knew no sin to become sin for us, so that in Him we could become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). The Apostle also says in our epistle reading this morning that God has made Jesus to be our wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30).

So, Jesus numbered Himself with us so God could credit us with His righteousness. This is quite the healing ointment for the sinner who comes recognizing their sin and hoping there is a way they could be accepted by God, knowing it could not be in themselves. Jesus came to John being numbered with sinners to fulfill this hope and make it a reality. And so it really in Jesus.

Third, when Jesus numbered Himself with sinners, He entered into our death, which is the wages of sin. But He did this so that He could arise out of that death in His indestructible life. Now we are identified with Jesus's life. He enters into our death, having numbered Himself with us; we arise with Him into His life, as we are now identified with Him.

This is God's righteousness indeed. It is the righteousness by which He delivers us in Jesus and gives us His kingdom. It is the righteousness by which He forgives our sins and regards us as righteous by grace, on account of Jesus.

And now this deliverance takes a very definite form for you and me, as we are baptized into Christ. When Jesus was baptized, the voice came from heaven: This is my beloved Son, with whom I am pleased. And the Holy Spirit was seen descending on Jesus. This was Jesus's anointing for ministry.

When we are baptized into Jesus, God the Father gives His promise to You through baptism: "You are my beloved son or daughter. I am pleased with you. Here now is my Spirit."

He does not say I am pleased with you on your own account. He says it on account of Christ. And so what Christ rightly deserves to be called, "I am pleased with Him," God the Father calls us by grace and gift: "I am pleased with you.

This is so important because it is our anchor in the storms of this life; and it is our entry into the life to come. Christ Himself is our anchor, as He has numbered Himself with us. He connects us to Himself in Baptism and there God calls us His very own in the righteousness of Christ. It is water that has been applied to you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, pursuant to Christ's command and promise. In this water you have been given a new name, God's name; thus you have a source of the washing away your sins; thus you have a place to be assured of the promise of new birth in the Holy Spirit. In baptism you also have a calling and purpose. It is a calling to be God's child. It is a purpose, the kind of deep purpose that is like ground under your feet; that gives purpose to your life.

In short, Jesus and Holy Baptism are an anchor against the darkness.

There is a British crime drama series called Endeavour. It features detective constable Endeavour Morse and detective inspector Fred Thursday, and crew, as they investigate crimes. In one episode, they are on the trail of a serial killer. At the end of the episode, the killer has lured Fred Thursday onto a roof of one of the buildings at the University of Oxford. The killer's plan was to push Thursday off the building. Morse also arrives there.

They end up subduing the killer.

But both Thursday and Morse were badly shaken and distressed by all this. Thursday turns to Morse and says: "A case like this will tear the heart right out of a man. Find something worth defending."

Morse says: "I thought I had . . . found something." I think he was referring to his work as a detective.

But, Thursday says: "Music?" Morse is a big fan of opera. "I suppose music is as good as anything. Go home! Put your best record on . . . And with every note you remember that's something that the darkness couldn't take from you."

Well, we have something much better that the darkness can't take away from us; that it really cannot take away. It is Jesus Christ Himself. He is the Light that shines in the darkness that the darkness cannot overcome. He has numbered Himself with us here. He has stood up to the devil and endured the worst, the worst we endure, with us. And He has risen with life out of the darkness of evil and death. He was baptized into us. And we are baptized into Him.

Jesus and our baptism into Him is the one thing that the darkness cannot take away. In

Jesus and our baptism into Him we have God's name, and God's promise of forgiveness and life in God that overcomes all things, even as we walk through dark times here. It is God's righteousness that will prevail completely in the end, the righteousness by which He saves us. And in Jesus, you are connected to this righteousness through baptism and faith. This is an amazing gift, and it is our life, for which we give God all thanksgiving, honor, and praise. Amen.