

Mark 1:4-11

The Baptism of our Lord

Our Lord Jesus has gathered us into His presence again this morning because today is a very special day. Today we celebrate Holy Baptism—the Lord's and ours. Before His baptism, nobody knew anything about Jesus. He lived in obscurity up in the north country, in Nazareth of Galilee. There he was known simply as the "carpenter's son." A handful of shepherds had knelt before Him at his humble birth in Bethlehem. Wise Men from eastern lands had graced him with their kingly gifts when He was a young child. The temple teachers had been utterly amazed by His wisdom at the age of twelve. And then, for the next eighteen years, there is nothing to be known, nothing out of the ordinary with Jesus, nothing to distinguish him from any one else. He preached no sermon. He worked no miracle. He grew into manhood like any other boy growing up in Nazareth.

Then one day Jesus came out of the darkness of obscurity into the public light. He came to the banks of the Jordan River, in order to be baptized by John. John's baptism was a sinner's baptism, a washing of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People came confessing their sins, and John's baptism was an absolution—a washing from sin. But John pointed to a Mightier One whose sandals he was not worthy to untie. In his baptism, John pointed to a greater Baptism, one that would bring down the Holy Spirit in fullest measure.

And then, here comes Jesus! Here comes Jesus to this bath for sinners. He came, NOT because He was a sinner, but because he stood in the place of sinners. Our Lord Jesus was perfectly obedient to the Law, obedient even to death on a cross. He had no sin to confess, no stain that needed washing. He had no need for repentance. And yet Jesus insisted that John baptize him. The Son of God came to be the least among us, the servant of all. God reached all the way down to us in His Son. The Lord Jesus lowered himself to be baptized as a sinner. The Sinless One stood with sinners in the water of the Jordan.

You see, my friends, Holy Baptism is the great equalizer, because God plays no favorites. It doesn't matter if you are a tiny infant or an adult, a prostitute or a Pharisee, Jew or Gentile, German or Norwegian, educated or uneducated, wealthy or poor, God makes no distinctions; but we delight in our distinctions, don't we? We look for ways to elevate ourselves above others. We worry about our status and our dignity. Yet we are all baptized alike—with the same water—in the name of the same Triune God, into the same death and resurrection of Jesus. And that's what matters to God. Jesus isn't ashamed to associate with us sinners, and that includes you and me.

Imagine yourself taking a bath in someone else's bath water? It's a rather disgusting thought isn't it?, especially in our time when we are so obsessed with the idea of "catching something" from someone else. But that's what Jesus did. The day that Jesus was baptized, the water of the Jordan was teeming with sin—our sin, and the sin of the world. It was filled with every imaginable evil: the worst of our immorality, drunkenness, deceit, pride, gossip, slander, and greed—everything that our sinful nature can produce. The Pharisees and the religious leaders refused to even step into such water. They didn't want to be seen in the same water with filthy prostitutes and sinners. The Pharisees didn't think they needed repentance and washing.

But Jesus wasn't ashamed to associate with sinners. He wasn't ashamed to step into a sinner's bath water. He stood in the water with the prostitute and the tax collector, with the Gentile and the outcast. He stood shoulder to shoulder with sinners—people just like you and me. Jesus was soaked to the skin—dripping wet with our sin. He became the adulterer, the

drunkard, the liar, the thief, and the blasphemer. He became the cheater, the murderer, the homosexual, and the abortionist. God made him who had no sin, to be sin for us—so that in Him, we now become the righteousness of God.

That's why I can call you the holy saints of God. That's what the baptism of Jesus is all about. Jesus took up our sin, our guilt, our punishment, and our death. He took all of it into His own body. He carried it all...all the way to Calvary. And then He put it all to death in His death on the cross. And now, you and I receive tremendous blessings from Jesus: His righteousness, His forgiveness, His glory, and His life. Jesus gets treated like a sinner, so that we are now declared saints through faith in Him. Jesus was baptized into our sin; and we are baptized into His righteousness. He was baptized into our death and damnation; we are baptized into His life and salvation. Jesus was baptized into the curse of the Law—the curse that we deserve because of our rebellious disobedience—and we are now baptized into God's blessing and favor, all because of Jesus' perfect obedience.

You know, I've never had the opportunity to see the Jordan river with my own eyes, but I'm told that it isn't very pretty. Jordan River water isn't very clean. It never has been. But, it isn't the water, it's the Word of God that is joined TO the water that makes it a cleansing water. And it is the Word of God—the Word made Flesh, Jesus our Savior—who joins Himself to the water of our Baptism! That is what makes Holy Baptism a water of life, a water rich in God's grace, a water that works rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, because Jesus—the Word—is there!

Dear children of God, on the day of His baptism, Jesus was identifying Himself with sinners. He was stepping into the place of sinners. Jesus was entering the cesspool of our sin, the foul sewage of our sinful hearts, and He was making it clean with His own flesh and blood. Jesus was making a sweet and cleansing water. The Word made flesh was joined with the water in a marvelous way that day at the Jordan river. The sinless Son of God absorbs the pollution of our sin and purifies us with His own blood. Never had water been so graced by God, then on that day when the Son of God entered the water and sanctified it.

And, at the moment of our Lord's baptism, the heavens were torn open, weren't they? And later when Jesus died, the curtain in the temple was torn open from top to bottom. You see, our sin shuts heaven up tight. It cuts us off from God's presence. Sin makes us God's enemies. We deserve nothing but to be abandoned in Hell, and God would be perfectly justified in doing just that. But instead, He sent His Son to tear the heavens wide open. Through Jesus, God has opened for us the gates of eternal life!

Here is the door! Here is the door for us rebels to become God's children, reborn and renewed. Here we are safe and sound in the presence of our loving God. That door, my friends, is the narrow way of Jesus' death and resurrection. And Holy Baptism brings us through that door, joining us with His death and His life. "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

That's why Jesus was baptized. In His baptism, God showed us that in our Baptism, Heaven is opened to us. The barrier between us and God is torn down. The door is unlocked, the gate is unbarred. We now have peace with God through our Lord Jesus. We have unlimited access to God's love and mercy. My friend, do you realize what that means? Do you understand the magnitude of these words? You may now come into His presence with thanksgiving, and enter His courts with praise. Heaven is opened to YOU, and God Himself descends to meet YOU. He comes to be with you in the water of your baptism. There the

Father speaks in testimony. There the Son is in all His servanthood. There the Spirit comes down and hovers like a dove. There the Almighty God speaks those beautiful words to YOU, my friend: "This is my beloved son, this is my beloved daughter, with YOU...I am well pleased!"

Now, when the Voice from Heaven speaks and the Spirit from Heaven descends, we know that we dare not look anywhere else for a gracious God but where this Man Jesus is. He is the One to whom the Spirit points. He is the One who points us to the Father. Here at the Jordan River, Jesus is publicly announced, as He takes up the task that the Father has given Him: to suffer and die for the sin of the world, and to rise again on the third day. Here is the Suffering Servant, the One who would be pierced for our transgressions, and crushed for our iniquities, who would bear the sins of the world and make intercession for the transgressors. Our Lord's baptism establishes His public ministry, and puts Him on the road to Calvary, where He will put our sin to death once and for all in His death on the cross.

Dear saints, that's why we celebrate today. That's why this day is so important. Our Lord's baptism teaches us to treasure our own baptism. Ours is the greater baptism to which John pointed, the baptism that Jesus commanded after His death and resurrection when He said to His disciples: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you."

My friend, to be baptized into the Name of the Triune God is to have the very gates of Heaven opened to you, to have the Father's voice declare you to be His beloved child, to have the Spirit descend upon you, to have Jesus—the sinless Son of God—stand in the water with you as your Savior and Redeemer.

So, thank God for your Baptism. Thank God for your Baptism—today and every day. Draw upon your Baptism daily, when your sins oppress you and your conscience weighs you down with guilt. Hold up your Baptism as the greatest gift and treasure that Jesus has given you. The heavens are torn open. The dove is descending. The voice of the Father rumbles from Heaven. Those things didn't happen to Jesus for His benefit, but for yours, so that you can now rejoice in your Baptism and know that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are mightily at work there to save you, now and forever. Amen.

--Pastor Steve Schulz