

The Baptism of Our Lord
8 January, Anno Domini 2023
St. Matthew 3:13-17

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Baptized of God,

The head must go first and then the body must follow. Jesus must pave the way and level it before we can walk it. Before Baptism can clothe you in the righteousness of Christ, it must first clothe Him in your unrighteousness. Jesus doesn't show you how it is done. He doesn't step into the Jordan as an example for you. He submits Himself to the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins that He may be declared by the Father to be the acceptable sacrifice in your place. He receives the water that He might be made known to Israel as the Christ, the promised Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. By joining with the crowds of sinners being baptized by John, Jesus was willingly humbling Himself, the Son of the Most High God, to be counted as the most wicked of all men, bearing the guilt of the whole world.

This is utter madness to everything our egocentric flesh can imagine. Even John was baffled. It's not that he was necessarily wrong. He did need to be cleansed by Jesus. All men do. It is shocking to see the sinless Son of God to become the lowest of all men. Our judgment and punishment are just. Every commandment stands against us, rightfully accusing us. We are the ones who have sinned against God, seeking to be like Him, seeking His power and His authority. We are the ones who deserve the unvarnished wrath of God against our rebellion and our idolatry.

Jesus, on the other hand, had absolutely no sins to confess. Jesus isn't the one who breathes out hatred and anger and curses his neighbor under his breath. We are. Jesus isn't the one who indulges lustful fantasies, speaks ill of his wife, or encourages all manner of unchaste living. We are. Jesus isn't the one who obsesses about what He does and doesn't have and can't rest or be happy until He has the pleasures that this world has to offer. We are. Jesus isn't the one who flippantly uses the name of God or passes the day without calling upon God or sets the Word of God aside as though it is something only for children and fools. We are. We need to rush to repentance and confess unreservedly our complete and utter guilt before God. We need Jesus to wash us and cleanse us and purify us because we are covered head to toe, inside and out, with the filth of sin.

Of course it makes no sense for Jesus to be baptized if we need nothing more than a good example of what we are supposed to be and do. Of course it makes no sense for Jesus to be baptized if we just need someone to light a fire under us and motivate us and help us discover the potential for greatness that lies within. Of course it doesn't make sense for Jesus to be baptized if we are already good people who just don't yet understand how great and worthy and wonderful we really are.

But none of those things are reality. We have the Law. We have the Ten Commandments. We know what we are to do. Seeing someone else do it doesn't in any way give us the ability to do it. It just makes it all the more clear how hopelessly sold into sin we really are. And there is certainly no greatness in us. There is only wretchedness unless we want to charge God with being a liar. God says that every inclination of hearts from our youth is only evil. Jesus says that we can't do any good thing apart from Him. And the only potential that exists in us the potential for evil. If we are truly great and worthy and wonderful, then why does Paul cry out "Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death"? Is he just exaggerating to make a point?

Truly, the Baptism of our Lord is foolishness to those who are perishing, who blindly go on in their sin and guilt imagining that they have neither. But to us who are being saved, the baptism of Jesus reveals to us the great wisdom and mercy of God because it makes clear to us that He is the Christ, the Savior who has come to break the iron gates of hell and set us free from death. As we behold the open heavens and the Spirit of peace abiding with Jesus and hear the voice of the Father proclaiming with all clarity "This is My Beloved Son with whom I am well pleased", we behold the work of our salvation being accomplished. We see the Lord Jesus assuming the work of saving man from sin by becoming sin for us. We see God humbling Himself to love and serve those who hate Him. We see the Lord stooping down to serve the slave - to serve us. His love for us and for His Father was so perfect that He who is God of God and Light of Light didn't not think of equality with God something to be grasped or used for personal gain. Instead, showing His true divinity He humbled Himself to receive the wretched death of the cross, to be hung up between two evildoers as a curse, rejected by men and by God to save men and to do the will of His Father.

And thus your own Baptism is filled with all that Christ is and has accomplished on your behalf. In Holy Baptism sinners become the very righteousness of God. In the washing of the font the enemies of God become His beloved sons and heirs of His kingdom. In the new birth of water and the Spirit we who were once dead in

our sin and our trespasses have now put on Christ and have been made alive with Him who sprang up out of death as the victor and has made straight the way to everlasting life.

The way of Baptism is indeed the way of death. For we must die if we are to live. And only those who do not love their life in this world are willing to die to it, to lay aside all desire for power and glory and wealth and the praises of men. Only those who are willing to be despised by the world as weak and foolish can find beauty and strength and truth and wisdom in seeing Jesus in the Jordan and on the cross. We must walk the way that our Savior first tread, passing through death, suffering the hatred of those whom the world esteems as good and religious and wise, so that we too might be raised to newness of life, now as we are clothed in righteousness and have received the Holy Spirit, and one day as the gates of heaven open once again and the Lord Jesus Christ comes, no longer humble, but fully glorified, yet no less our brother who has prepared an eternal home for us. Follow your Savior through the water and the cross. Only but most assuredly there will you find the blessed hope of everlasting life and the open gates of heaven.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.