

The Baptism of Our Lord  
7 January, Anno Domini 2024  
St. Matthew 3:13-17

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

Beloved Baptized of God,

We are not so full of wisdom and understanding as we might think. In actuality, apart from the truth which is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, we are fools, we have no understanding whatsoever. We may be able to figure out how to build extremely tall buildings and cure diseases and send people into space, but in the end such knowledge is nothing more than a novelty that has no lasting value. It cannot save us in eternity and has no use before the judgement seat of Christ. We confer degrees and titles upon people after years of reading and studying and writing, we put such people on television and call them experts, and we create memorials and hang plaques in order to remember them for their great insights and contributions. But still, knowing all that, we know nothing.

John the Baptist had been given great wisdom by God and was even given the unique honor of being the forerunner of the promised Messiah. Still, he did not yet understand. Still, he tried to stand in Jesus' way in order to prevent Jesus from being baptized because John was sure that he knew better. He knew why he baptized people. John knew that he baptized with water for repentance. He was the sinner, not Jesus. John was the one who needed cleansing. What could John possibly have that Jesus needed? What could Jesus be doing stepping into the Jordan?

Jesus was putting all of our vain imaginations of salvation in the garbage heap. Jesus was taking all sinful human wisdom and turning it on its head, showing it to be utter nonsense, foolishness. Because for all our smarts, we continue to fall deeper and deeper into the dark illusion of our own greatness and our own ability to save ourselves. In other words, as we grow "smarter" we become increasingly blind to the utter depravity of our sin and our need for salvation.

But, that we find Jesus, the sinless Son of God, suffering the baptism of sinners, can lead to only one conclusion - we are completely incapable of saving ourselves. We are

wretched sinners who deserve God's eternal judgment and there is nothing we can do, no amount of striving and trying, no amount of piety and good works, no amount of earthly success that can demonstrate an ounce of goodness in us capable of making satisfaction for our sin. All of our greatness, all of our accomplishments, all of our discoveries - they are nothing in the eyes of God in bringing about our salvation. They may benefit us in this life but that is all they will ever be able to do. When we are laid in the grave, all that we have done will wither and fade as we have. If there was anything we are capable of doing to merit salvation there never would have been a Christmas, Epiphany, Baptism of our Lord, Good Friday or Easter. Jesus would never have needed to humble Himself and take on our flesh. He certainly didn't need any of those things for Himself.

You and I did. If Jesus had permitted John to prevent Him from being baptized, there could be no righteousness for you and me. If Jesus is not Baptized as a sinner, then there is no fulfillment of righteousness for you and me. Jesus enters those waters confessing the sins of the world as His own - every single last one of them. Jesus confessed that day "The lies, the lustful thoughts, the callous dismissals, the pride, the idolatry, the despising of God and His Word, the dishonoring of those in authority - all are mine. I will bear them. I will suffer their condemnation and their punishment. God the Father may turn His face away from me." That is the true and only righteousness. All that we have and are, without Christ, are nothing and worse. It is utterly foolish to spend our lives seeking after worldly greatness and pleasure. Why would we when God Himself despises all that the world calls great, all that the world calls wise, all that the world treasures and praises, all that the world calls righteousness?

These things are about man's glory, about gaining something for yourself. But man is delusional to think that there is anything about him that is glorious or righteous. Our hearts are too filled with sin and greed and filth. Whenever man seeks to glorify himself, he robs God of the glory that rightly belongs only to God. When our time, our efforts, our money, and our attention are spent for the purpose of enriching ourselves and building little earthly kingdoms for ourselves, we make ourselves infinitely more poor because we do it at the cost of the things of true and eternal value. More of us always means less of our Lord.

God doesn't ask you to make yourself righteous. You can't do that. There is no righteousness unless it is given to us by God. That is what Jesus has come to do. That is why Jesus stepped into the Jordan River. That is why the heaven's were opened, the

Holy Spirit descended, and the Father Almighty spoke His words of affirmation “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” This one, who drove out demons; this one, who endured the bitter hours of temptation in the wilderness; this one, who had mercy and compassion on the sick and forgave the sins of the penitent; this one, who was despised and rejected by men and hated by those whom the world counted holy and righteous; this one, who was condemned and hung on cross with malefactors as His company because He preached of man’s unrighteousness and God’s mercy. This one is the one with whom God the Father is well-pleased, not any other. You would never know it to see Him because He surrounded Himself with the weak and the broken. Contrary to the wisdom of the world, the Son of God sought nothing for Himself. Instead, He poured out His entire existence, even His Blood, solely for the benefit of others, indeed, the very ones who murdered Him. This one, this one hanging dead on Calvary, is God’s only and beloved Son and nothing pleases the Father more than the truth which Christ preached and the death He died for the forgiveness of the sins of the world.

That is God’s righteousness, the true and only righteousness which God now imparts to those who, like Christ before them, step into the Jordan. The waters which once marked Jesus as the Christ, the anointed Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, now mark the Baptized as righteous children of God. These waters which bear in them the very promises of God open to you the kingdom of heaven. Through Baptism you pass from death to life, from the wilderness of sin to the Promised Land of God’s kingdom, from unrighteousness to righteousness. Because you are Baptized your righteousness has been fulfilled because it is Jesus’ very own righteousness won for you on the cross and bestowed upon you as a free gift by the Holy Spirit.

This is the righteousness which the world rejects - a righteousness that is not of their own works. It is utter foolishness to them. It can only be received in humility and faith, by those who long for a righteousness they know they don’t deserve and could never earn. It is a righteousness for the weak and despairing. It is a righteousness for those who count all that they have and are as loss for the sake of Christ. It is a righteousness that is only but always found in the Son of God whose feet of flesh first stepped into the River Jordan, sanctifying all waters that they might become a blessed flood and a lavish washing way of all sins.

This Baptismal righteousness is yours to treasure. It is given to you to remember and rejoice in each and every day. Use it well. Take it up as a shield against the accusations of guilt hurled at you by Satan and your own conscience. Take it up as a sword to drive away all vain notions of self-righteousness. By Holy Baptism you have been made righteous and declared by God Himself to be pleasing to Him. Let it be so now. Forsake all that the world would have you believe is of value. Lay aside its accolades and pleasures. Be a Baptized fool and boast only in the Lord, for God loves foolish things.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.