

The Baptism of Our Lord
12 January, Anno Domini 2025
St. Matthew 3:13-17

Baptized of God,

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

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 does it for you. 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 wicked man, because He alone bears the wickedness of all people.

Reason and sinful flesh cannot make any sense of this. Even John was baffled. It's not that he was necessarily wrong. He did need to be cleansed by Jesus. All men do. All men are covered head to toe in filthy thoughts, words, and deeds. We are the most unholy of beings having rebelled against the holy Law of the holy God. We have sought to live by our own rules and our own selfish, self-serving desires. Like pigs we have rolled in angry, lustful, covetous, lazy thoughts. We have sought after our own glory rather than the glory of the One who in mercy created us.

Jesus, on the other hand, had absolutely no sins to confess. His every thought, word, and deed were pure love His only concern at all times was the will of His Father and the good of His neighbor - you. Nothing but what was 100% in keeping with God's Word ever left His lips. He never concerned Himself with men's opinions or asked what faithfulness to God's Word might cost Him.

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 the Scriptures and your own experiences and reason tell us clearly that 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 our 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 is 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? Or do you not see within yourself the same bitter war of the evil of your own will and readiness to carry it out versus the good desires of your new man who desires to walk in love and obedience according to the Ten Commandments and the great difficulty, almost impossibility, of actually carrying those out?

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 and that they don't really have problem doing good. 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. We see the one whom God appointed to crush Satan's head by taking away his only weapon - Satan's ability to accuse you of sin. 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 - the very good and gracious will of His Father and your Father through Holy Baptism.

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 as we are clothed in righteousness and receive the Holy Spirit. And one day at last, the gates of heaven will open once again and the Lord Jesus Christ will come, 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 there, 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.