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Baptism of Our Lord (Series A)

January 12, 2014

Text: Matthew 3:13–17

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

Most of Jesus' earthy life was marked by obscurity and the humdrum, ordinary events of daily living. Yes, Gabriel announced the Lord's conception in Mary's womb, angels and shepherds celebrated the Lord's birth, and Wise Men followed a wondrous star to worship the Christ Child. An angel told Joseph to get out of Bethlehem to Egypt lest King Herod fulfill his murderous rage on Jesus. Remarkable events to be sure!!

Otherwise, the Lord's earthly life was as plain as His own physical appearance. The prophet Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would not have any majesty that we should look at him or any beauty that we should desire him (Is 53). The Lord grew up in the no-nothing town of Nazareth. In John's gospel, the disciple Nathanael is quoted as saying "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" – referring to Jesus' obscure birthplace.

And Jesus Himself doesn't do anything miraculous or out-of-the-ordinary until today's gospel reading from Matthew 3:13–17. The Lord's baptism marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. No miracles are performed, no teaching is given, no disciples are called; nothing happens before the Lord is baptized.

That's quite illuminating, to me at least. The Lord's ministry begins with baptism. The Church's ministry really begins with baptism. Children/infants are baptized first with the intention that they will be instructed through the Scriptures in the significance of their baptism. Adults are instructed prior to baptism with baptism being one of the chief goals in mind. In other words, the central event in our Christian life is our baptism. It's all baptismally focused!

To understand this dynamic event, we need to remember why John the Baptist was baptizing in the Jordan River. Earlier, in Matthew 3, we learn that John was preaching in the Judean wilderness a sermon that could be summarized in one sentence: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

John's baptism was a baptism for repentance. Repentance is that life-long attitude of God's people where they are continually turning away from sin and hungering after God's righteousness and holiness. Repentance is the daily garment that we wear as Christians. For we are called by God our heavenly Father to forsake continually the corruption of sin and iniquity and follow after the beauty of holiness. John's baptism was for sinners desiring to be forgiven and who long to live according to God's revealed will.

Jesus steps into the Jordan River to receive a sinner's baptism. John objects, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (vs. 14). You're not a sinner, Jesus. You are the One who will baptize God's people with the Holy Spirit and fire (vs. 11). This isn't right Jesus. You're the sinless One who needs to take away my sins. Why don't you baptize me, Jesus?

Our Lord's answer is crucial in understanding what's happening. Jesus says, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (vs. 15). This is the way it needs to be for "now." There will come a time when Jesus will baptize His people. But for now, Jesus needs John to do His part in fulfilling God's righteous plan to save the world.

Jesus must be baptized to fulfill God's righteous plan to save the world. Sinners came to John's baptism to get rid of their sins; Jesus came to John's baptism to take on sins. Jesus' baptism is so important for the salvation of the world that if Jesus had not been baptized, God's righteousness would not have been fulfilled. Jesus would have disobeyed His Father's plan, thus disqualifying Him as Messiah.

God's righteousness is fulfilled by Jesus becoming humanity's substitute. He is standing in the place of sinners in order to rescue sinners from the domination of the devil and to save the world from the corruption of sin and death. Paul nicely illustrates what Jesus was doing in the Jordan River in II Corinthians 5:21 "For God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." In Galatians 3:13 Paul writes, "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us." Jesus is baptized with a sinners' baptism making Him a curse. The sinless Son of God becomes THE sinner in the Jordan River. This baptism marks Him for a sinners' death on the cross. His baptism is a baptism into our sin and condemnation that He might take it upon Himself.

The Lord does not draw back from a baptism meant for sinners just as He does not draw back from death on the cross, a sinner's death. He is plunged into the Jordan and He is plunged into crucifixion for us. Such is the radical love of God for us. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And if He is to take that sin away, He must carry it in His body to the cross.

Jesus' baptism foreshadows His dying a sinner's death on Calvary. As His baptism in the River Jordan was "to fulfill all righteousness," it was a baptism that marked Him as the Promised Messiah who would die with our sin that we might live by His righteousness. Not to be baptized by John, not to be crucified, not being resurrected on the third day would have been much easier for Jesus, but it would have been unrighteous on His part.

Jesus' baptism in the Jordan marks Him as the One who would die for our sins. Our Baptism in God's Trinitarian name marks us as those who have died to our sins and are alive in God. This is what St. Paul marvelously declares in Romans chapter 6, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (vs. 3-4).

We are marked for eternal life. And we mustn't think that we'll ever be cast off by our Lord. The prophet Isaiah describes Jesus as the Spirit-anointed Servant who will not break a bruised reed or quench the faintly burning wick in 42:3. Jesus will not cast you aside or discard His redeemed children when everything seems to fall apart. Every day for Christians is living out God's gracious gift of Baptism for we constantly walk in repentance. Our minds are forever being renewed by the Holy Spirit given to us in Baptism. The affections of our heart and soul are being reshaped in conformity with the heart of Jesus as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. We are a new creation, old things have passed away. The newness of Christ's resurrection life fills us so that we consider ourselves "dead to sin and alive to God" (Romans 6:11).

If there was ever any uncertainty as to Jesus' identity before His baptism, all such questions are put to rest as He stands in the Jordan River. That otherwise ordinary man, Jesus of Nazareth is none other than the Holy Spirit filled, beloved Son of God the Father almighty. In seeing who Jesus is, we find the clearest revelation of God's Trinitarian nature. Vs. 16-17, "And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of

God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’”

The baptism of Jesus reveals who God is. So our baptism reveals who we are. And the glorious truth is that there is a redemptive parallel between Jesus’ baptism and our baptism. When we are baptized with water in God’s name, we are plunged into Christ. As the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, the Holy Spirit descends upon you. St. Paul, in Titus 3, declares that the Holy Spirit is poured out upon you in baptism. As Jesus is declared to be the well-pleasing Son of the Father, so you are proclaimed to be adopted children of the Father. Such a Father-child relationship is most clearly seen and heard every time you pray “Our Father who art in heaven...”

Christian Baptism may appear to be an unremarkable, quaint religious ritual using common, ordinary water. Those were the kinds of things people thought about Jesus. His baptism revealed there was more to Jesus than the ordinary man He appeared to be. So your Christian baptism reveals there’s more to you than what meets the eye. You are Holy Spirit filled, well-pleasing, forgiven and loved children of God the Father. Your baptism into Christ makes it so.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.