

Last week we talked about the boy Jesus, about how when he was only 12 years old, he knew that God was his Father. This week we're going to talk about his inauguration into the ministry with his Father's declaration that he was his Son at his Baptism. We're going to talk about that and what it means for our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

MATTHEW 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ 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; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

When we read Bible stories, sometimes they're straight forward and the teaching is obvious, like when Jesus actually explains a parable or a metaphor himself. For example, he said, "**I am the light of the world,**" and then he said, follow me (John 8:12). That makes sense: Light reveals one's path; thus Jesus was saying that his words shine light on how we might walk with him in this world. But there are other Bible stories which have history behind them which requires further exploration for understanding. Jesus' baptism is one of these stories.

In the Old Testament there was no command from the Lord to be baptized. The closest we come to any kind of baptism tradition was created by the religious leaders who said that adult converts to Judaism should be baptized in water as a symbol of their death to their former lives as pagans and their new lives as followers of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Radical fringe elements of the Jews also had a rite of baptism as a symbol of ritual purity.

In the Gospel we find John the Baptist preaching hellfire and brimstone, telling the people to get right with God or die, that they should be baptized as if they never knew God and reclaim their inheritance as the children of Abraham.

Now the Jews had not heard from God for over 400 years, ever since the prophet Malachi preached God's promise: **"I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD" (Malachi 4:5).**

As they listened to John preach, they asked themselves, "Is he not Elijah warning us of the coming judgment?" They knew their sins would prevent them from receiving any accolades from the Lord, indeed, they feared his wrath. And so they accepted John's baptism as a symbol of their re-conversion; they plunged into the water in droves.

What an awesome sight it must've been: Thousands of men and women repenting for their wickedness, drowning the sinner, and being reborn as new creatures as they reemerged from the water.

Of course, we know that what the people did was only symbolic, that they demonstrated their love for God and their good intentions through this act of contrition. But they didn't really change.

But then Jesus came forward to be baptized by John. John told him he had it backwards, that he himself should be baptized by Jesus. **But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (v.15).**

When he, Jesus, the righteous one, was baptized, he was buried under the water for you and me—he didn't do it for himself, for he was without sin—and in that single act, he changed what had been a mere physical symbol of repentance into a transformative, supernatural event, thus fulfilling **"all righteousness."**

It turns out that the Lord God Almighty had been watching the whole thing and he provided public witness of his presence: the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove, and God the Father proclaimed, **"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (vv.16-17).**

This is our baptism, not the symbolic baptism of John the Baptist, but the transformative miraculous baptism of Jesus complete with Holy Spirit and the declaration of our sonship under God our Father. Alleluia!

With this witness of the introduction of the miracle of baptism, let's consider St. Paul's instruction later on. He wrote in his Letter to the Romans, chapter 6: **"Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Romans 6:1).** That was a

rhetorical question for we already know the answer. He himself said, **“By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:2).**

But why not? We love to sin and God loves to forgive—It’s the perfect arrangement! But it’s tiring, isn’t it, to keep coming back to the same altar, with the same confession, with the same plea for forgiveness over and over again? We sound like a broken record to ourselves, and we don’t like that song. We want to learn, we want to grow, we want to stop creating pain. But it’s hard to get that old tune out of our heads.

As we know, “to do the same thing over and over again, and expect different results,” is the definition of insanity, and we wonder if we shouldn’t be committed.

We know that if one drinks too much, he’s going to have a hangover in the morning. But he keeps drinking.

We know that if one always takes offense when someone disagrees with him, he’ll leave behind a trail of broken relationships. But his heart rages nonetheless.

We know that if one is always working and never spending time with his children, he will probably not see much of his kids when he retires. But he continues to be a workaholic anyway.

We hate putting on weight, and we know we shouldn’t eat a sack of potato chips and drink half liter of Diet Coke before we go to bed, but we keep on doing it!

Thus the old saw, “If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you’ve always got.”

Paul continued his admonition to the church, writing, **“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Romans 6:3).**

A three-year-old girl was in church with her family watching a full-immersion baptism. Suddenly, she let out a blood curdling scream: "Pastor pushed that man into the water! Why'd he do that, Daddy?!" Her father tried to explain how the man’s old spirit was being drowned with his sin. But the little girl screamed even louder, "Why didn't Pastor just spank him?"

In Baptism, God doesn't spank us. He kills us! Which is to say, everything that separated us from the love of God dies. We usually think about baptism in the category of "life," but first the Lord needs something to bring to life. Jesus said, **"unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24)**. Thus our life in Christ begins with baptism where our old nature is killed in Christ's death.

Paul continued, writing, **"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" (Romans 6:4)**.

It's a miracle: God linked our baptism with Christ's crucifixion. He who was perfect and righteous, who was baptized for the imperfect and unrighteous, who died a sinner's death, rose from the grave and ushered us who were imperfect and unrighteous and bound for utter and eternal darkness into the light, into the very presence of God Almighty in one fell swoop.

Paul wrote, **"We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin" (Romans 6:6)**.

"Enslaved to sin": The difference between people who are slaves and those who are not, is freedom. To be a slave to sin is to be unable to break its chains, to be bound up in the inevitable, to do what I do because I have given up on life.

But Jesus lives in you; he lives in me. In our baptisms we received his Spirit, his righteousness; in our baptisms we received the benefits of his death and resurrection; in our baptisms we died to sin and were resurrected as new creatures.

Even so, this new life easily slips from our grasp, doesn't it? We question our faith; we doubt our salvation; we're suspect of our own loyalties. How can I who professed Christ as my lord 37 years ago still have buttons which can spark so much anger? I don't know how to explain it except to agree with Martin Luther, who remarked, "I thought the old Adam drowned in the waters of baptism, but I discovered the miserable wretch can swim!"

Thus we identify as both sinner and saint. Saint, for a vision of our heavenly home has been implanted on our hearts, a vision which can never be erased, can never

be snatched away, a vision which was implanted in our hearts and minds through the miracle of baptism. But sinner too, for we are still flesh with fleshly yearnings and desires and needs which are not easily quenched.

But there is more. For we are not slaves to what we were. Despite our challenges, despite our failures, we are not doomed to the darkness, to the shadows. But we are free in Jesus. What does this mean for us? What does it mean for you and me?

For me it means that when I feel overwhelmed by my responsibilities, when I feel guilty for being a jerk, when I know that my heart is not in the right place, God is present, and he hears my voice. Sometimes, usually, most of the time this is what it takes for me to come to my knees and pray as the tax collector did, **“God, have mercy on me a sinner” (Luke 16:13)**.

This prayer takes me back to my baptism where everything was made right. It takes me to that place where God is my Father and I am his son. It takes to that place where he makes me whole and my confidence, my trust, my courage returns and there, there in that place of humility and confidence the Lord answers my prayer, wipes away my fears, and he heals my heart.

This week, my friends, let us give thanks for the miracle of Christ’s baptism and our own. God gave you his Spirit and he told you that you belonged to him. Believe it. Claim it. Pray it.

This week let us call on God that he would renew in us this miracle, that we would pray with courage and confidence in the name of Jesus and be healed that we might fight the good fight and walk with him in his light.

And this week let us take the opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.