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The Baptism of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Wrong or Right?”

Text: Matthew 3:13-17; Isaiah 42:1-7

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

When things are going well, or rightly, or according to plan, we usually don't take particular notice of those things in our lives. But when something goes wrong, or the unexpected happens, *then* we take notice. For example, as long as the roof on your house keeps the rain off your head, you probably don't think much about it. But if water were to start leaking through . . . We often take our cars for granted, until they break down and leave us stranded on 395! And our health is not something many worry too much about, until its not there anymore. It's when something goes wrong, when something's not right, when the unexpected happens, that often forces action, or change, or attention, in our lives.

And so it was that day at the Jordan River. John was baptizing because that's what John did. He was preaching repentance and judgment, and sinners were repenting and being baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. And things were going along just fine, normal, and routine, day after day. *Until* . . . one day, John looked up, and the next sinner in line to be baptized was Jesus. At first John probably doesn't believe it, and so wipes the Jordan's water off his face and eyes, but He's still there! It is Him! And by this time others start to notice because the line has stopped moving! This isn't right, John says. ***“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”*** Something's wrong here.

But no, Jesus says. This is right. And it is right ***“to fulfill all righteousness.”*** All rightness. John consents. Don't know if he understood. But he consents, and baptizes Jesus. And then Heaven opens, and the Holy Spirit descends. This is right. And then the Father speaks: ***“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”*** This is right. This is exactly what should happen. And let all the world take notice.

But what is right? With what is the Father well-pleased? It is this: that God's Son is standing in solidarity with sinners. That God's Son is not ashamed to be counted among the sinners. That God's Son becomes the sinner, so that all of us sinners, in the water, might be the righteous ones. The right ones. One pastor put it this way: Jesus is baptized

in our sewer, to put our sins upon Him, that the self-same water might be cleansed to wash our sins off of us. That's a pretty graphic picture! But pretty accurate. Our sin is the cesspool that we are living in and wallowing in, and so of course John objects! Don't step in this water, Jesus! It's filthy! It's full of sins! And Jesus says yes, and steps in. It's where He wants to be. It's where He needs to be. It is right. And the Father is delighted. That's what Isaiah says.

And that's an important thing for us to realize. When the Father speaks from Heaven: ***"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"*** He is not just saying that because of *who Jesus is*, but more importantly, because of *what Jesus is now doing*. The Father is delighted that His Son is entering the cesspool. The Father is delighted that His Son is becoming the sinner. John objects. We might even object! It doesn't seem right. But the Father is delighted. The Father is delighted because this is right. Jesus is bringing right-ness to a world gone horribly wrong.

So we shouldn't be surprised if this right-ness looks completely different than what we might expect. We're used to seeing wrong in this horribly wrong world – and so right is going to surprise us, not necessarily be what we think, and *maybe even make us object*. . . . This is what the prophet Isaiah was describing in his words that we heard today – that Jesus' work will not be "business as usual" or go as we expect. ***"He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street."*** That's what *we* do. Protestors crying out, *demanding* their rights, trampling on those who get in their way, trying to make things right by force. But not this one. Not Jesus. His work will go differently. ***"He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth."*** That is what happens to us. We try, but we get to the point where we throw up our hands. They don't care or want this – fine! At least I'm alright! At least I believe! But not this one. Not Jesus. He will not stop, He will not be satisfied until He ***"fulfills all righteousness."*** Until all are right. All people, all nations, all prisoners to sin, all the blind in heart, all in darkness. . . . And in this work of Jesus, His Father is delighted. His work not in power but in weakness. Not by force but in love. Not by separating Himself, but by joining us in our cesspool.

And so Jesus is baptized. His work of right-ness begins. And it is right. God delights.

And when we are baptized, we are made right. By Him and His water. Right with God. Righteous. We are forgiven, and God is delighted *with us*.

Now, some object to this, wondering how baptism can do such great things. It's not right! There must be more! There must be something we must do! But it is right. God's right. Putting us right. And Martin Luther said in response: *"If our hearts would take*

*this in they would burst for joy in a hundred thousand pieces. In a world given over to sin, death, and the devil, there is one point where the delight of God dwells.”* And that point (as we heard) is in His Son. In His baptism. And when we are baptized we are with His Son and His Son with us and therefore God is delighted with us. For these waters have cleansed us from the filth and stench of our sins. These waters have drowned the sinner in us and raised a son of God. These waters have opened Heaven to us. In these waters the Spirit has descended upon us. In these waters the Father speaks to us, **“You are my son, my daughter.”** And we now respond and pray, *Our Father, who art in Heaven . . .*

But can water really do all of that? It can if the Son of God is in that water. For water, by its very nature, both kills and gives life. Just ask Noah. Just ask the children of Israel who crossed through the Red Sea. Just ask the tsunami survivors in Southeast Asia. The tsunamis that came, killed, and yet those people also depend on the very same water to come in the typhoon season and flood their growing fields so that their crops can grow. It is a double-edged sword.

And so too Baptism. The waters of Holy Baptism both kill and make alive. Killing the old sinful man in us, and making alive a new, righteous man. The question was, when Jesus showed up that day at the Jordan, would John (in a sense) “kill” the Son of God in those baptismal waters? Was John willing to consider and treat Jesus as a sinner? You see, John knew this was much more than just a ritual! This was real! This was powerful! This had meaning! Could he do this? A prophet’s work is never easy. Could he do this? He objected. Jesus said yes. Do it. I want it. This is right. For the “killing” and judgment here begun in the Jordan was the first step to the killing and judgment of the cross. And nothing would stop Jesus from accomplishing this for us. Nothing would stop Him from joining Himself to us in our sin and death, that we might be joined together with Him in His resurrection and life. So that we could go from wrong to right.

And so He steps in. He is baptized in our sewer. And the Father is delighted.

And your Father is delighted in you too. Not because of who you are. Not because you’re perfect. Not because you’re better than the next guy, or give more, or pray more, or witness more. Those things are good, but they’re not what make you right. He is delighted in you because you are baptized. And He is delighted when you remember that, and when you return to those waters each day. When you return in repentance and confess your wrong-ness so that He forgives you and make you right. When you return in weakness so that He makes you strong. When you return in doubt so that He gives you faith. When you return as a child and He responds as your Father. Your loving Father. Your Heavenly Father. Your Father who delights in giving you all that you need, even to

giving His only-begotten Son. Giving His Son into birth, into death, and even now into your mouths, that you might live. That the wrong-ness of our sin and death would be overcome and done away with by His resurrection and life. And with such gifts given to us, as Luther said, how could our hearts *not* burst for joy in a hundred thousand pieces! And our lives show forth that love.

Now, this joy Satan wants to rob you of, telling you instead how filthy you are, how unworthy you are, and that God couldn't possible delights in the likes of you! You, with all your problems and doubts and guilt and I-can-handle-it-on-my-own attitudes! But you and I have some cold water to throw in Satan's face! Some baptismal water, which says: *yes Satan, you're right!* I am a sinner. Worse than I even know! But in the Jordan, God's Son became a sinner with me and for me, and baptized into Him I am a child of God. You may tell me I'm on my own, but Jesus showed me different. You may tell me I'm wrong, but Jesus says I'm right. You may condemn me, but my Father forgives me.

***“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”*** Those words once spoken of Christ and now also spoken of you. And it is right. And God is delighted!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.