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The Baptism of our Lord

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Vienna, VA

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“Trading Places”

Text: Luke 3:15-22; Romans 6:1-11; Isaiah 43:1-7

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

There is always a sense of urgency in the preaching of John the Baptist. When he began his work he proclaimed: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 3:2). The kingdom of heaven is *at hand* - it is not far away, it is not coming sometime in the future. It is here, it is now, it is at hand. So do not delay, repent. Do not put it off, repent. Do not assume you have plenty of time, repent. Now.

And the people did. Matthew tells us that people *from Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan* were going out to John (Mt 3:5), to his *baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins* (Lk 3:3). And when the people needed help repenting, John gladly helped them. When they asked John, “*What then shall we do?*” (Lk 3:10) he told them - so they would repent of not doing what they should, of doing what they should not, and then in receiving the forgiveness of their sins begin to live a new life.

All this, then, created an atmosphere of expectation and anticipation and excitement. The people were on the edge of their seats. *The kingdom of heaven is at hand!* Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? They started wondering if John might be the Christ, the promised Messiah, the anointed one. But John not only puts to rest that thinking, he also ratchets up the tension and anticipation. He “doubles down,” as they would say today. *It’s not me, he says. It is one far mightier than I! He will baptize not only for forgiveness, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*

And the time for this is at hand. He is at hand. The kingdom is at hand. This judgment and separation is at hand. The whole region was on pins and needles . . . which is usually not a good thing for the people in charge, for the rulers. So King Herod tried to settle things down a bit by locking up John in prison.

But before he did, all that John was pointing to and talking about *happened* . . . when Jesus was baptized. ***The heavens were opened, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in bodily form, like a dove, and the voice of the Father sounded out from***

heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” Or in other words, the kingdom of heaven came to the Jordan when Jesus was baptized. For there heaven is open. There is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There Jesus begins His work for us and for our salvation. There His work of judgment and forgiveness begins.

Now, I think it safe to say this is not quite what the people were expecting. I’m not sure how many actually saw this or understood it if they did. They were probably expecting something bigger and more exciting and spectacular than just another baptism . . . even one accompanied with these unusual events. But this is a big deal. Jesus being baptized is a big deal.

For Jesus didn’t need to repent or be baptized. He had no sin to repent of and no sin to be forgiven. And yet He is baptized. So if He’s not doing it for Himself, He must be doing it for those He came to save. For you and me. And what He’s doing is *beginning the judgment* that John talked about. Luke points to that in an interesting way by saying that **when all the people were baptized**, or *after* all the people had been baptized - as if Jesus is the culmination of all these baptisms - then Jesus is baptized. Once the water of the Jordan got good and dirty with all the sins of all those people, then Jesus stepped in - not to get clean, but to get dirty. Not to be forgiven, but to take the guilt of the sin of the world upon Himself. That He be judged for it instead of us. That He be condemned for it instead of us. That He pay the penalty for it instead of us.

And that’s Jesus did when He offered Himself on the cross. Though He was the perfect, innocent, spotless Lamb of God, He was imputed with the sin of the world - it was put upon Him in our place. So that, as Paul would later explain: *He who knew no sin was made sin for us, that we who are sin might in Him become the righteousness of God* (2 Cor 5:21, paraphrased). Or in other words, He took our place in judgment, so that we could have His place as children of God.

Which is why the Father is well pleased! This is exactly what He wanted. This is exactly why He sent His beloved Son into the world - to take away the sin of the world. And so when Jesus stepped into the Jordan that day, it was the beginning of the end. It was the beginning of His work that would take Him to the judgment and death sentence of the cross, but *end* in His resurrection from the dead and His ascension into Heaven. So that we who die might also rise from death and ascend into heaven to live a life that will never end.

Which is what the Apostle Paul says in Romans is exactly why we are baptized - that as Jesus in His incarnation is *united* to us in our flesh, so in baptism we are *united* to Him in His death and resurrection. When you are baptized, all that Jesus did for you became yours. As your sins were imputed to Him so now all His

righteousness is imputed to you. And so baptized into Jesus, you and your sins were judged with Him, condemned with Him, and you died with Him; but then also were you raised with Him and set free from sin with Him. United to Jesus the Holy Spirit descends upon you too, and you too hear those wonderful words from God your Father: ***You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased.***

Which is all to say that in Jesus' baptism and in yours, a great exchange takes place; a great trading of places. Jesus came to be baptized in your place, so that in your baptism you have His place. So that in baptism, *the kingdom of heaven is at hand for you.*

Now, just like in Jesus' day, this is not quite what some people expect. Some would like *the kingdom of heaven at hand* to be something bigger and more exciting and spectacular than just another baptism . . . but, really, what could be greater than this? To have the very Son of God come and take your place in sin and death and give you His place as a child of God in life forever? To receive the washing away of your sin, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the approval of God your Father? Could you do this - *any of this* - on your own? Not a chance. Not even close. Yet it is all given to you here, according to the Word, work, and promise of Jesus. He is the who, what, where, when, why, and how of God. It's all Him and His work for you.

And now set free - set free from sin, from judgment, from worry, from death - do you want to go back to all that? Of course not! That's a silly question. But some were thinking that in Paul's day, and some think it in our day and age as well. Thinking that my baptism and forgiveness means I can do anything I want because I know Jesus forgives me! Paul says in response to that: ***By no means!*** Or, no, no, no, no, no, no! That's not what your baptism means! Your baptism means that you have been set free to ***walk in newness of life, to no longer be enslaved to sin.*** Not to go back to it as if nothing had happened to you. Not to wallow in the mud and filth again. ***By no means!*** You are a child of God now. You have been raised to a new life.

Which means that our baptism is not an excuse to go sin, but our **refuge** when we do sin, when that Old Adam in us gets the best of us, when before you know it you find yourself where you should not be, doing what should not be done, and filled with shame and grief. At just such times, remember your baptism - as we do here each and every Sunday at the beginning of the Divine Service in our confession and absolution. But not only here, but every day, remember your baptism. That that old sinner is not who you are anymore, but a child of God. That the promise of forgiveness in your baptism is still true and still yours. That these sins, too, that haunt and plague you, were washed upon Jesus in His baptism and died for by Him on His cross. And so repent and be washed clean again. Repent, and hear those words from an open heaven **to you:** *I forgive you all your sins in the Name of the*

Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And know they are true! And if your sins still bother you and plague you, come and hear those words spoken directly and individually to you by name in Private Absolution. And come also to the Lord's Supper, to eat the Body and drink the Blood of the Lamb of God who takes away your sin, and be strengthened by Him in His forgiveness and life. And live no longer under the dominion of sin, death, and the devil, but ***dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.***

And when the day of final judgment comes, when Jesus comes again in glory with all His angels, those words of Isaiah that we heard today - so *pregnant with baptism imagery!* - will be true for you *then*, even as they are true for you now.

***But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.***

***When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.***

***For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.***

Yes, Jesus went with you through the waters, and you will go with Him through the fire, through the judgment. So you have nothing to fear. For He is *your* God, *your* Saviour, and you are His beloved child. For as baptism was the beginning of the end for Jesus, it is the beginning of the life that *has no end* for you.

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.