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The Baptism of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Your Bridegroom Baptized for You”

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.

When King Herod wanted a wife, he didn't go on match.com or eharmony, he looked at the woman his brother Philip had married and thought to himself: *I want her*. I'm sure, being a king and all, he could have had his pick of a great many women, who wanted to be the king's wife and live in a palace and have great wealth. But he wanted Herodias. No one else would do. And somehow he pulled it off. Either he convinced his brother that he really didn't want her; she wasn't good enough for him . . . or he convinced her that she really didn't want his brother; he was a much better catch. Either way he got his wish. He broke up their marriage and took her for himself. It was just one of the notches in his belt of evil deeds.

So when John the Baptist caught wind of this . . . ah, now here's someone who needs to repent and be baptized! Here's someone I need to go preach to. So he did. But Herod wasn't having it. He didn't need some long-haired, camel-hair-shirted, locust-eating, freaky guy from the sticks telling him what to do! So Herod probably at first just ignored him. But when he wouldn't stop, when he kept drumming his preaching of repentance into Herod's ears, Herod finally had enough and threw him into prison. Preach to the rats, John.

And sometime after that, Herod would have John beheaded.

Now, you may be wondering . . . what does any of that have to do with the Baptism of Jesus? For that's what we're commemorating today; that's our focus today. And that's a very good question. So if Luke were here today, I'd ask him: Luke - why did you, why did God have you, put a reference to that story right into the middle of your description of John's baptizing and Jesus being baptized? It really doesn't need to be there. The story would work perfectly well without it. In fact, it would flow *better* without it. And John's not in prison yet - he's still baptizing and baptizing Jesus. So why? Why tell us that *here*?

Well, by doing so, Luke gives us a couple of interesting contrasts: First while he tells us that John is locked up, *the heavens are opened*. John is silenced, while the voice of the Father resounds from heaven. With that contrast he is showing us that the door, so to speak, is being closed on the Old Testament, and the New, its fulfillment, is coming onto

the scene. The one mightier than John has come, and the Holy Spirit descends onto the one who will baptize with that Holy Spirit. The torch is being passed from John to Jesus, from forerunner to Messiah, from a son of man to the Son of God.

But it's the second contrast here that even more significant; the contrast Luke sets up here *between Herod and Jesus*. Herod is an unholy bridegroom, taking a wife that isn't his and that he shouldn't have; a wife not of love but of lust. Thinking of and concerned not for her but only for himself. Jesus has come to be a bridegroom, too, for His bride the church. But He is a *holy* bridegroom, come to be with and love and care for His unholy bride. And so He comes to the Jordan and takes His place with her. Where she is there He wants to be, that where He is going, there she can be as well. He becomes a sinner with her, that she become holy with Him. And so Jesus stands arm in arm with His bride before John, says His "I will," and is baptized - not because He needed it, but thinking of and concerned only for her. For us. For you. He walks down your slummy aisle to the Jordan, that you might walk up a glorious aisle with Him, to heaven.

And the family, who were in attendance, is well-pleased . . . the Holy Spirit descending, the Father calling out, in joy.

So there's more going on here than meets the eye. Luke is writing this account some years later, after he knows how it all turns out. And he wants you to know, too. Not only about Jesus' baptism, but about your own and what it means for you as well. That as Jesus came to join you to Himself and take you as His own, to be one flesh with Him, that what's yours is His and what happens to you happens to Him . . . so too the other way around - that what's His is yours and what happens to Him happens to you.

And so when you were baptized, there was more happening there than meets the eye as well. When you were baptized, the Spirit that descended upon Jesus descended upon you. The voice that marked Jesus as the Father's beloved Son with whom He is well-pleased, marked you the same. Yes, as we just sang: *All that the mortal eye beholds is water as we pour it. But the eye of faith unfolds the pow'r of Jesus' merit* (LSB #407 v.6). Jesus' merit which in baptism unlocks the prison of sin and death that the satanic Herod through us in, and sets us free in the forgiveness of our sins. To live a new life, a holy life, with a holy Bridegroom.

And all that is what Paul was talking about in his letter to the Romans that we heard today. That in baptism, what happens to you happens to Jesus, and what happens to Jesus happens to you. You die and so He dies. He rises and so you rise. Death no longer has dominion over Him, and so it no longer has dominion over you. And so you have a new life and newness of life. You're no longer a slave to sin and your sinful urges, as Herod was. That guy's dead! You are now alive in Christ, your Bridegroom, the one who gave His life for you and in whom you now live.

Now, you may be thinking, that's sounds too good to be true! Baptism can't be that great. Not everyone who is baptized is faithful and saved. And that's probably true. But the problem's not with baptism, but with us. For in baptism, a promise is made, Bridegroom to bride: *I love you and will love you; you are mine*. Our marriages say that too . . . but sadly, sometimes spouses walk away from that promise made to them. For whatever reason, they take off the ring that was put on them by their spouse while he or she was making that promise to them, and go in search of something else. So, too, sometimes the baptized.

But just as marriage isn't the problem but the sinners in the marriage, so baptism isn't the problem but the sinner. But here's where baptism is even better - the one who made that promise to you, that He loves you and will love you, and that you are His - isn't a sinner. His promise is good and reliable and forever. And so every week, every time, you come back in confession and repentance to your Bridegroom, every time He is here to forgive and welcome you back. You don't have to prove it and you can't earn it - He gives it. That's how powerful His love, how powerful His blood, how powerful His promise to you.

And to those who think that means they can put on their baptismal ring for one hour each Sunday and then throw it off as they walk out the door and do whatever they want the rest of the week . . . Paul already has an answer for you. ***What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin*** - are we to continue to throw off our rings when we walk out the door - ***that grace may abound*** - that we may just put them back on again each Sunday? ***By no means!*** Or, to put that as we would say it today: *What are you nuts?* If you have such a Bridegroom . . . why wouldn't you want Him every day? Why wouldn't you want to live in His life every day? And forever?

Do you not know? therefore Paul asks. Maybe we don't. Maybe we don't realize what we're doing. Maybe we don't understand the power of sin. Maybe we don't think about what we're doing. Maybe our sin has blinded us. Maybe we're stupid and stubborn. I know those last two describe me pretty good.

But as Jesus stepped into the Jordan that day, He knew. He knew exactly what He was doing. He knew exactly what it meant. He knew exactly who you were. And He knew that what began here in the Jordan was going to end at the cross. He knew. And He told John: *Do it. I can't not do this for them. They are lost, they are dead, without me. They need life, they need forgiveness, and I'm the only hope they have.*

And with the water still dripping from His hair, the Father and the Spirit testify and rejoice. The Bridegroom is committed to His Bride, to set her - to set you - free.

And now, now it's the blood that dripped from the cross that is here for you, as Jesus says not to John but to the Church: *Do it. Baptize all nations. Do it! Preach the Word. Do it!*

Forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Do it! Do this in remembrance of me. For in all these things, there's more than meets the eye. Here is my cross, here is my Body and Blood, here is my forgiveness, for you. I love you and will love you; you are mine.

And so are fulfilled Isaiah's words, spoken so long before Jesus came onto the scene . . .

***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.***

That is the Bridegroom you have, standing in the water with you. The Bridegroom who is with you always. ***The Lord who created you and formed you*** and says to you: ***Fear not, for I have redeemed you; It is finished*** (John 19:30). ***I have called you by name, you are mine.***

And the Father and the Spirit rejoice. As we do now, in having such a Bridegroom, and in His love and care and forgiveness for us. Even when your life is flooded with troubles, or set ablaze with trials. As Isaiah said, ***they will not overwhelm or consume you.*** For your Bridegroom is with you in them. Your Bridegroom who did not get going when the going got tough, but came to you; and came for you.

That's the Jesus in the Jordan that day. That's the Jesus John saw, and baptized for you. That's the Jesus who is here for you. And that's the Jesus, the Bridegroom we will one day see, when He comes again, not to step into the Jordan, but for us to step out of our graves. From death to life. From this world to the next. From this world of sorrow to the Marriage Feast of the Lamb in His kingdom. The Feast that will have no end.

And the family will be rejoicing then, too. And not just the Father and the Spirit, but the whole family of faith. John and all the martyrs, all the faithful who have gone before us, the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. The promise given in baptism fulfilled, finally, and forever.

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