

14 January 2018
The Baptism of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

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“Baptized for a Greater Life”

Text: Mark 1:4-11; Romans 6:1-11; Genesis 1:1-5

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

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John appeared in the wilderness. The wilderness. A place isolated and lonely, a wild and unruly and dangerous place. What, would you say, *where*, would you say, is such a place, such a wilderness, in our world today? A place where would John go today with his message of forgiveness? Well, there are probably many you could think of, but one, I think, might be **a prison**.

So imagine . . . Imagine if our president, who as president has full power to completely pardon anyone he wants, went to the highest security prison we have. The place where they lock up the worst of the worst, the really bad criminals. He appears there one day with a pile of pardons. And all who come and confess may have one. But don't deny your sin. Don't tell him you're innocent and have been locked up wrongfully. If you do, no pardon for you. What do you think would happen?

Well, a number of things, I suppose. Certainly, there would be those eager to confess and receive this pardon and be set free. But I think also there would be those who were indignant at having to confess; too prideful to lower themselves to him. There might be some who know their guilt and feel they don't deserve such a pardon. And there would undoubtedly be an outcry from those outside the prison at such horrible people being set free. They don't deserve it, and we don't want them back on our streets. I think John had all those kinds of people and had to face all of that.

But what if our president then went to the town the prison was in with another set of pardons, but these to forgive the debts and taxes owed by those in the town. At the stroke of his pen they'd be gone. Do you think that would change some attitudes?

But here, too, there would be those who object. They must pay what they owe! How can the town run if taxes are not paid? You cannot just pardon people. You cannot just forgive. You cannot just set free. I'm sure John faced those attitudes as well. You can't just baptize, John. You can't just forgive like that. But it did not stop him. He had a gift

to give, and he was going to give it. To all. To those whose sins were great and to those whose debts were small. He made no distinction. For the one who sent him made no distinction.

But John also preached. He had a message to proclaim along with this gift. That if you think this pardon is great, you ain't seen nothin' yet! There's another one coming, mightier than I, greater than I. So much so that I cannot even come to him on hands and knees and take off his grubby sandals! He's coming with an even greater gift, an ever greater baptism. For ***I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.***

The baptism of this greater one gives forgiveness, yes, but this too: a new spirit. His Spirit. A holy Spirit. That, as Paul said, you ***no longer be enslaved to sin.*** Or maybe we would say it this way today: *that you be no longer addicted to sin.* That you now have a new mind to think a new way, a new heart with new desires, and a new life to live. That forgiveness be much more than just getting out of jail or out of debt, but the beginning of a whole new life. A holy life, with a holy spirit.

And then this mightier one, this greater one, *came*. He came to John and was baptized by him. And the greater *happened*. Unlike all the other baptisms that John had been doing, when Jesus was baptized, the heavens opened, this Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven announced what it all meant: ***You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.***

Now, on the one hand, such a statement makes sense. The Father has been well pleased in the Son from eternity. But on the other hand, it is strange. For the Son is here receiving the baptism of the sinner. The Son, who is absolutely free, subject to none, has no debt, and has broken no laws, goes into the prison and lines up with the prisoners for pardon. And the Father is not only okay with, but *pleased* with that?

Yes. For with this the Son is not receiving a pardon He doesn't need, just pretending to be a prisoner. *Jesus is fulfilling His office* - His office as the Christ, the Messiah, the Redeemer, the Saviour. By virtue of his office, the President of the United States has the authority to pardon. By virtue of *His* office, Jesus has the authority to come and take the place of the prisoners. Not just to pretend to be one, but to *become* one. To become us. To take our place. To take our guilt, all the time in prison, all the debt that is owed, the condemnation for all of us on death row, and make it His own. He'll pay it for us, to set us free. And to set us free not only from our sin but from our *addiction* to sin. That we be not just prisoners set free, sinners forgiven - but prisoners made into upright citizens; sinners made sons of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

That's why Paul asks the question: ***What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?*** Or to phrase that a little differently: What are we saying here?

That getting out of jail we can return to a life of crime and not worry about it because we know there's forgiveness? That we can now sin as much as we want because we'll just be able to walk of jail again and again and again? No way! he says. **By no means!** That's not it at all. That is to ignore completely what Jesus has done for us and the gift of the Holy Spirit He has for us. That is to think of baptism today as still just the baptism of John - the *lesser* baptism, if we could say it that way - and not the *greater* baptism, the baptism of Jesus. The baptism which not only forgives and sets us free, but gives us also a new life to live. A Spirit-led life. **Not just a better life, but a greater life.**

For I think there's a difference. Most people want a *better* life, but what that means is quite different. It might mean moving from prison to a homeless shelter, from a homeless shelter to a place of your own, from an apartment to a house, from a lower paying job to a higher paying one, from being single to being married, from being married to having children, from working to retirement - and the list could go on and on. Yet for some, these very things could be seen as not better - but more responsibility, more inconvenience, more time consumed, more worries. Better is a matter of opinion. And better changes.

But a *greater* life - how many of us think of that? A life that's greater than just you and your wants and desires. Greater than your better. We often use sin to get what we think is better; but sin doesn't give us a *greater* life. It can't. Not this kind of greater. It makes us less. Ask Adam and Eve. They reached for better; they got lesser. They didn't get greater; they got death.

Jesus came to change that. Jesus came to the Jordan to change that. Jesus was baptized to change that. And Jesus baptizes you to change that.

When Jesus is baptized, the greater one becomes the least, so that we who are least may become greater. That we not have just better lives, but greater ones. Ones filled not with sin, but filled with God and His greatness. The greatness not of selfishness but of love. The greatness not of being served but serving others. The greatness not of being able to do whatever we want but of doing what is good. The greatness not of being led around on satan's leash, but led by the Spirit given to us. Not addicted to sin, but alive in Christ.

A greater life. A significant life. A better life is not necessarily a significant life. In fact, it may be quite insignificant; quite self-centered and small.

But when you're there for a friend in need, when you help your parents, when you take care of your children, when you forgive someone who has deeply hurt you, when you speak a word of hope and encouragement, when you pray, when you give, when you help, when you lift up others - that is the greatness not addicted to sin, to serving yourself. That is the greater life of Christ. That makes a difference. That means something.

And so **John** baptizes the greater one who becomes least, and **Jesus** baptizes the least who become greater. For what did St. Paul say today happens in baptism? Not that we continue to sin. No, **sin becomes dead to us**. We begin to live a new life. A resurrected-with-Christ life. A no-longer-addicted-to-sin, find-my-life-in-sin, life. But a life where sin, death, and devil have no dominion over us. Where we are ruled by them no longer. They will still happen, but we've been baptized into the greater one, into Christ. What's ours is His and what's His is ours. The life we now live is new; it's God's. God's life given to us in Christ. And so a *greater* life. A life that will never end.

Being *out in the wilderness, clothed with camel's hair with a leather belt around your waist and eating locusts and wild honey*, and then being thrown into prison by King Herod and eventually having his head danced off - many would not think that John had a better life. And maybe not. But Jesus said: *among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist*.

But then He adds this too: *Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he* (Matthew 11:11).

That's what Jesus wants for you. Not just a better life, that's not enough. But a greater life. A kingdom of heaven life already here, already now. And it's here for you, in whatever wilderness you're in, in a font. For as we heard in the reading from Genesis, where there's water, the Spirit, and the Word of God, there's life.

So when you find yourself in the wilderness, and even when you're not, when you're in an easier place in life, remember this: that you are baptized. You are a child of God. You have been given a greater life. And you have a meal here that is greater than all others - the very Body and Blood of Jesus. That no matter where you are, no matter how things are going in your life, you have been given this gift. You have a life that matters, that makes a difference, and that will last forever.

For just as when water, Word, and Spirit got together in the beginning and launched the first day of creation, of life, so water, Word, and Spirit launched the first day of your new life. And when the evening comes for you, when your life here in this world ends, there will then be the morning of a new day, a greater day, for a greater you. Because that's what Jesus came. That's why He came to the Jordan. That's why He was baptized. And that's why He baptized you. His gift. A greater life. For you and for all.

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.