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The Baptism of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“The Heavens Were Opened”

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

This is a gentle reworking of a sermon from yesteryear. Enjoy this encore presentation!

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

Why did Jesus have to be baptized?

That’s the question I am asked whenever people hear this story. And the answer, very simply, is this: *He did not have to be*. Jesus had no sin to repent of. He needed no washing of forgiveness. Jesus is the Lord and Creator of all, and the perfect, sinless Son of God - what could John possibly give Him that wasn’t from Him and of Him? Nothing.

So the next question then is: *So why was Jesus baptized?*

Well, for the same reason He was born and lived and died: *because you needed Him to be*. Because you need a Saviour. For you have sin. You were born in sin, *with* sin, and to your charge have added sins of thoughts, words, deeds, and desires. Each and every day. You have sin that you know of - selfish acts, angry words, hateful thoughts, shameful desires; and sin that is so deep in your nature, so ingrained in your being, so part of our everyday life, that you don’t even know of it. But your Saviour knows. He knows it all. He knows it is you who need the washing of forgiveness, and therefore, He is baptized. For you. Because when Jesus stepped into that water, **the water didn’t change Jesus - Jesus changed the water.**

Now to the crowds that were along the Jordan that day, it didn’t look that way at first. The people had no idea that one of the folks in the crowd with them that day was the one they were looking for and hoping for - the promised Messiah. They were looking at John and wondering if he was the one. John said “No!” But He is coming, and soon. And He is so much greater than I that I am not even worthy to do the most lowly and menial of tasks - untie his shoe.

Yes, John, you are correct. You are not worthy. Yet by your hand this great one, Jesus, will be baptized! For to this He has graciously called you, to do this very thing; to be a small cog in Jesus’ work of salvation. . . . We are not worthy either - to be children of God, to speak His Word, to raise His children, to be His pastor, to be in His house. Yet

He has graciously called us - you and me - to do these very things. To be small cogs in His continuing work of salvation. Is that not a wonder? For John. For us.

So the crowd took no notice of Jesus at the Jordan that day. Just another pilgrim; a Nazarene, a Galilean. Yet actually, this pilgrim had come on a longer journey than that! For this one in the crowd that day had come all the way down not just from Nazareth or Galilee, but from heaven itself! Here was God Himself, standing in solidarity with His creatures. Standing with us against the evil one, just as He had promised He would. His holy humanity mixed in with all our sinful humanity. One of us, yet not one of us. Which would soon become evident.

For when Jesus is baptized, Luke reports, three unique things happen: *heaven is opened, the Holy Spirit descends upon Him in bodily form, like a dove, and the voice of the Father sounds forth from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."* Yes, here is the One greater than John. A man who is also God's Son. A man who has no sin, for with Him God is well pleased. A man at whose baptism heaven is opened so that the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven may attend and see this wonder. The wonder of God as man, taking man's place in the water. He is more than an example - He is our substitute under the Law, under sin, under the sentence of death, to save us. Of no other god could this be said. All other gods demand from their creatures; the true God comes and serves His creatures.

And we need it, we need this! For without Him, heaven remains closed. Closed as it was for our first parents when they fell into sin and were expelled from Paradise into a world of death - a world of thorns, a world of pain and rebellion, a world of struggle and suffering. You've felt it. You've given it. You've groaned under it. The thorns of sin, the struggles of life, the pain of sin, the crushing insensitivity of selfishness. But what could you do? Without Christ, the way to the Tree of Life was blocked by fearsome angels with flaming swords.

But at the Jordan that day - did you hear? - *heaven opened again!* . . . That is a phrase we should not take lightly. When that happened before - when *the windows of the heavens were opened* - it was in Genesis (7:11), when the sinfulness of God's creatures had gotten so bad that He sent a flood to destroy sinful mankind from the face of the earth. All who had turned away from Him and would not believe in Him. But now *heaven is opened* again, for God is now using a flood of water not to destroy sinful mankind, but to destroy sin. To destroy sin through the One who would take all the sin of the world upon Himself and be destroyed by the flaming sword of God's wrath on the cross. He is *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*, as John would proclaim after this (John 1:29). And now, when the heavens are opened, the result is not just death - **but death that leads to life.**

That is why St. Paul speaks as he does to us today, as we heard from him in the book of

Romans. **That baptism is about death that leads to life.** For with His baptism, Jesus now begins His journey to Jerusalem and the cross, where His baptism will be fulfilled. Fulfilled as on the cross He is engulfed in the fire of sin and death. But with the Holy Spirit descending upon Him in bodily form *as a dove*, we are reminded of Noah's dove, which proclaimed the return of life after death. And with Jesus' resurrection, that is exactly what has happened. The power of the Law, the power of sin, the power of death has all been broken by Jesus. For as Paul said: He who has died has been set free from sin, and He who has died can never die again - ***death no longer has dominion over him.*** And so if death is defeated, then there is life. The life of God. The life of freedom. The life that has no end.

That is the life now given to you and all who are baptized **into Jesus.** Baptism, Paul says, joins you to Jesus in His death and resurrection, so that in Him, you too die and rise to live a new life. A new life free from the condemnation of sin and the power of death. A new life of freedom and love and forgiveness. A new life free to live, even though we still live in the midst of this thorny, painful, difficult world of death. But though the struggles and troubles be many and difficult, they *will* not - they *cannot* - win. For you are one with Christ, the Victor.

Listen again to how Isaiah talked about that very thing as He looked forward to this day of Christ's life and victory:

*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.*

In Baptism, the Lord called you by name. In Baptism, He made you His. In Baptism, He called you His beloved son. In Baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon you. In Baptism, the flames of God's wrath against your sin were quenched with the water of forgiveness and life, and so His fire is no longer a consuming fire but a purifying one. For He who created you has redeemed you. He is the Lord your God, your Saviour.

*How can water do such great things? If it's plain water, it can't. Plain water can only wash your body, but cannot touch your soul. But if Jesus is in the water, it can. Because remember, when Jesus stepped into that water, **the water didn't change Jesus - Jesus changed the water**, to a water rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth by the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul would tell Titus (Titus 3). The Holy Spirit who leads us to Christ and*

joins us to Christ. To His cross of death and life. To cross from death to life.

And as His baptism was the beginning of His journey to the cross, so too with your baptism, you have begun the journey to the cross. To where Christ has put His cross for you: here, at this altar. For here, the Body and Blood that once hung on the cross and died, but then rose from the dead and lives, are for you. Here, you eat and drink the fruits of His cross - the new Tree of Life - receiving the forgiveness, life, and salvation Jesus gives you in His Body and Blood. To raise you and strengthen you in the life He gave you in your baptism.

For you need raising and strengthening. You do. You know it. You fall, and sin beats you down. You grow weary of the fight, and the fight makes you weak. At times, it may seem hopeless, pointless, and as if there is no reason to go on, to keep trying. And so your baptism brings you here, where your Saviour places His Body into your mouth and pours His Blood over your lips and says to you: I am your strength; I am your hope; I am your life. Do not be afraid; I am with you. Always. Rise, and depart in peace. And we do, for He is faithful.

It started so simply and seemed so ordinary. Just another baptism. But when Jesus stepped into the Jordan that day, *everything was changed*. Not for Him, but for you. Not for Him because He came for this; but for you because He came for you. And still He comes for you, in the water, on the altar, in the Word. And when He does, *everything is changed*.

You no longer live a life that will end in death, but will die a death that ends in life. You no longer live a life of captivity under the condemnation of sin, but of freedom under the forgiveness of sin.

For in Jesus, in the water, heaven has been opened to you. *And it shall never be closed again*.

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.