

12 January 2020
The Baptism of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“To Fulfill All Righteousness”

Text: Matthew 3:13-17; Romans 6:1-11

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

He looked just like them. Like all the other Tom, Dick, and Harrys - or back then it would have been all the other Thomas, Reuben, and Simeons - going out to be baptized by this John in the Jordan. He walked like them, talked like them, and dressed like them. He was one of them. Like all of them. So they didn't take too much notice of Him . . .

But then His turn came for the baptism. John . . . he seemed reluctant. He didn't act the same as he did with all the others. They were too far away to hear what he was saying, but finally he did baptize this Yohshua ben Nazaret - Jesus of Nazareth. Just another baptism . . . *until it wasn't*. For then it seemed like the sky, the heavens, were being torn open. They'd never seen anything like it! And then a sound like thunder, only louder, and almost voice-like. And *then* a dove landed on Him. It seemed almost like heaven was reaching down to earth, right there, right then, on Him!

Because it was. That's exactly what baptism is. The joining of heaven and earth. Heaven reaching down to earth. You don't need a ouija board or tarot cards or some other kind of fortune teller to get in contact with the spiritual world - all you need is water and the Word of God. And then, right there, in that water, is the portal of heaven. Where heaven meets earth. Where God meets man. And where God forgives man.

That's exactly what baptism is, and what happened in your baptism. For while you can't see it here, in Jesus' baptism the invisible becomes visible. It shows us what cannot be seen. That in baptism, the Spirit descends and the Father is well-pleased with you. Well-pleased, for you are now His child. Taken by Him. Born again, born from above, to a new life.

That's what St. Paul said. Jesus was baptized like us and we are baptized into Him. We die with Him and we rise with Him. And so our sins die with Him and we rise to a new life with Him. You look like every other Tom, Dick, and Harriet - but you're not. Not anymore. When you were baptized, what happened to Jesus happened to you. And now heaven, which had been shut by Adam and his sin, is open again. For you.

But all that deserves a bit more explanation. Paul assumes we know it - *do you not know?* he says. Like we should. But many don't. Many don't think so highly of baptism. Many

don't know that baptism is not something that we do for God, but what God is doing for us, and to us.

And it all starts with that conversation between Jesus and John. John was right, that he needed to be baptized by Jesus, as we all do. But Jesus was right, too, that He needed to be baptized by John in order *to fulfill all righteousness*. So Jesus is not just being a teacher or an example here, as so many - even non-Christians - will say and acknowledge today. There's something else going on here, this *fulfilling all righteousness*.

Now, both Old and New Testaments are clear on this: on our own, righteous is something we **want** to be and **should** be and **try** to be, but that we **are** not and **cannot** be (Psalms 14 and 53; Romans 3:9). Our sin too often gets the better of us.

Sinful thoughts and desires which then blossom into sinful words and deeds. We try to make excuses for them, justify ourselves, make up for them. But the damage is done. Our righteousness gone. And all this on a daily basis.

But Jesus *can* be what we cannot be. And is. He is *the righteous one* (Isaiah 53:11; Acts 3:14). But here, He is fulfilling ALL righteousness. Not just His, not just some, but ALL. Yours, mine, the whole world's. He is filling it up, filling it to the brim, so that there couldn't possibly be any more. What Jesus is doing here, and in His whole life, He is doing for this. For you and me. To fill up our righteousness. That we be and have the righteousness we need.

That's why Jesus shows up with this mass of sinners at the Jordan. He didn't put Himself above us or separate Himself from us. He didn't avoid us and our sin. He puts Himself right down in it with us and stands with us. He says: *John, treat me just like them. Treat me like a sinner*, because that's what He came to be. That's what Paul tells us in his letter to the Corinthians: *He who knew no sin became sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

So Jesus is born as a man. He grows up with us, like us. He is baptized like us. It's like . . . like He wants to BE us, so that we can be HIM. So that we can be children of God. In fact, so much does He become us that He doesn't only live as one of us, He then dies our death, too. And it's not just His death - it really is OUR death. To fulfill ALL righteousness, He dies all our deaths. For the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), and so to pay ALL those wages for ALL people and fulfill ALL righteousness, He takes ALL our sins and dies ALL our deaths. And His baptism is the start of it. In His baptism, He who knew no sin became sin. It was as if all those sins that were being washed off all those sinners were being washed onto Him! That when Jesus was baptized, all that we are and do, became His. His responsibility.

But, Paul tells us today, if that's true, the opposite is too! That when YOU were baptized, all that Jesus is and does became yours. In baptism, he says, you die with Christ. But you also

rise with Christ. You live with Christ. You have been set free from your sin. You are forgiven. You are righteous. Jesus became like you, and now you become like Him. He grew up with us, and now we grow together with Him. And when you die, physically, that's not going to be the end for you either. Christ didn't stay dead, and so neither will you.

So John's baptism, Jesus' baptism, and your baptism - they're all different, but they all go together. You can't understand one without the others. Without all three, you only have part of the picture. John's baptism pointed to the Saviour. Your baptism gives you the Saviour. And Jesus' baptism connects the two. Or maybe better to say, *fulfills* the two. After Jesus fulfilled all righteousness with His death and resurrection, John's baptism was no longer needed. Now, there would be a new one. A new one that not only points to Jesus, but gives Jesus. And His Spirit. And His righteousness. And His forgiveness. And His sonship. And His heaven. And His life.

That's why Jesus then commissions His disciples and tells them to go and baptize all nations - not as John did, but in this new way: *in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 28:19). Because that's who was there at Jesus' baptism. The Son in the water, the voice of the Father from heaven, and the Spirit descending in the form of a dove from the Father and landing on the Son. And that's who's there at your baptism, too. The Son baptizing you, the Spirit descending on you, and the Father calling you His child. And what God says is, IS! And so you are His child. A righteous one. An heir of heaven.

But just as John's baptism was a single event that had a lasting effect - Jesus' baptism by John led to His death on the cross - so, too, is your baptism. **It is a single event that has a lasting effect.** Your baptism leads to a new life here, and an eternal life in heaven. So that each morning, when you rise from sleep, you rise to live not the same old sinful life as before - but the new life you've been given. In Christ. You living in Christ and Christ living in you. Each morning, saying *I am baptized!* Because that's who you now are.

Because Paul knew that all his talk of how great baptism is and all that Christ has done for you would be misunderstood and misused. And so to nip that in the bud he says: *What? Are you going to continue with all your old sins because you can just come back here and be forgiven? Is that what you think this is all about? No! That's not it at all! That's not who you are anymore.* That's like . . . well, that's like John's baptism never left. But you, you weren't baptized by John - you were baptized by Jesus. And you're not just forgiven your sin, you *died* to sin. And you were given not just a new lease on your old life - you were given a NEW life to live. A Christ life. So all that sin? Stop it! Don't take back those sins Jesus already died for. You really don't want them. They'll kill you. Physically and spiritually.

So better - far better! - is to remember who you are. *I am baptized!* I may look like every other Tom, Dick, and Harriet, but I'm not. Not anymore. I am a child of God. John's baptism was not just an empty event. Jesus' baptism was not an empty event. And neither

was yours. Something happened there. To you. And it changed you. Like nothing else in this world can. And it was all a gift. You didn't earn it or deserve it. None of us do. Or can. But just as Jesus' birth was pure gift out of God's pure love, so was your new birth in Baptism. Pure gift out of God's pure love.

Do you not know? You do. You know. God's Word has made the invisible visible to you. You see what others cannot. And so **you know, too**, that here at this altar is *another* portal of heaven. Where heaven meets earth. Where God meets men. And where God forgives man. Where Jesus comes to you to feed you with the same Body and Blood that stood in the Jordan that day, that hung on the cross, and that rose from the dead. To feed and strengthen your body and blood that was baptized into Jesus, and that died and rose with Him. New food for a new life. For a new *you*.

Do you not know? You do. You know. Even though the struggle continues. Those sinful thoughts and desires still rising up in you and at times blossoming into sinful words and deeds. But **instead** of making excuses for them, we confess them. **Instead** of justifying ourselves we are forgiven and justified by the blood of Christ. And **instead** of trying to make up for our sins, we rejoice that we don't have to - that **instead** of having to help ourselves, we get to help others. We get to begin to live rightly again, as God intends. Because we can't make ourselves righteous by acting rightly. But we do act rightly when made righteous by God. And you are. Righteous. Because of the one who fulfilled ALL righteousness, and then poured it out on you and into you when you were baptized.

So now you're full up, full to the brim, with His righteousness. You can't add to it - it's as full as it can get. Jesus doesn't do anything half-way. So now, you live from it. For just as sinful deeds blossom from a sinful nature, so too do righteous deeds, good works, blossom from those justified by Christ. And that's you, ***don't ya' know?*** You do. You know. You are baptized. A child of God. A righteous one. And with you, the Father is well-pleased.

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.