

9 January 2011
The Baptism of our Lord

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Vienna, VA

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“Unwrapping the Baptism of our Lord”
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.

Everything was going smoothly. John was preaching and folks were being baptized. Families from Jerusalem and Judea and all that region were coming. It was a busy, but exciting, time for John.

Until Jesus showed up. Until John looked up for the next family coming to be baptized, and instead of seeing sinners who needed to repent, he saw the One who did not need to repent, who had no sin, who needed no baptism. Yet there He was, shoulder-to-shoulder with all those sinners *as if He were a sinner, too*.

And so everything came to a grinding halt. John says, “*Stop! Wait a minute. This isn’t right. **I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?***” John is confused. He doesn’t understand what Jesus is doing here. And so Jesus says to him, “*It’s alright John. This is right. Do this. **Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.***” And at Jesus’ word, John consents, though he probably still doesn’t quite understand what is happening.

Do you? Do you understand why Jesus, the One who is without sin and needs no baptism, is baptized?

The key is in Jesus’ words to John, when He says to do this ***to fulfill all righteousness***. That’s language John could understand, because that’s what John was after too - righteousness. He was preaching to unrighteous people about their lack of righteousness. He was preaching about their sins, about the wrath that was coming, and the need to repent and turn their lives around. He was preaching to people like us.

But as great as John was - and as we heard a few weeks ago, during Advent, Jesus said that *among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist* (Matt 11:11). As great as John was, he could not fulfill all righteousness. And none of the folks who came to him could either. For John could administer baptism for the forgiveness of their sins, and the people could condemn themselves and resolve to do better . . . but they were sinners, and they would sin again. They

might improve, they might get better, they might even look quite respectable and be fine, upstanding members of society. *Like you*, who work hard, pay your taxes, don't beat your wife, help others. People who look good and who others would want as their neighbor.

But while you may be able to be righteous before the world, you can never be righteous before God. For His standards are higher and His judgments are deeper. And while you may be able to restrain the words that you speak and the deeds that you do and so look righteous to the world - God knows the words that were not spoken, yet formed in your mind; He knows the deeds that were not done, yet desired in your heart; He knows the resentment, the anger, the lust, the jealousy, the hate, the ridicule, the belittling - all the impurity and wretchedness and lack of righteousness that lives within you. The sin that lives within you, that has penetrated every nook and cranny of your human nature, and that makes all of us unable to fulfill all righteousness.

Very simply, something else is needed. Someone else is needed. And the Word of God unwraps this gift for you today: that Jesus is the One. He is the One who has come **to fulfill all righteousness**. To do what you could never do, and be what you could never be, and to do this and be this **for you**.

That is why Jesus takes His place with the sinners at the Jordan that day; why He stands shoulder-to-shoulder with them and with us, *as if He were one of us*. For He has come to be one of us. To take our place.

Perhaps a way to understand that is when you see someone in great danger or terribly ill, and you think to yourself: *I wish it were me, and not them*. Perhaps a child with cancer, or a child being abused, or a friend whose troubles just won't seem to stop. Our heart goes out to them and we wish we could trade places with them, that they might not have to suffer what they're going through. Jesus has come to trade places with us; to take our place.

But actually, that's not quite right . . . *Jesus does even more than that*. For what Jesus does, those examples aren't quite adequate. For imagine that it's not a child with cancer, but a criminal with cancer; it's not a child being abused, but an abuser being abused; it's not a friend in trouble, but an enemy in trouble. *Would you trade places with them?* Not in a million years, right? We don't want to help them, or pity them, or comfort them; they're getting what they deserve. But that is what Jesus does, because in taking *our* place, guess what? He is taking the place not of innocent children or friends, but of criminals, abusers, and enemies. For in our failure to keep His Law, in our failure to love others, that is what we are.

That is what Jesus is doing at the Jordan that day. He's not there with good people,

but with sinners; with the worst of the worst; with us. The righteous for the unrighteous, to make us righteous. He's there not to have *His* sins washed away, but to take *our* sins upon Himself. To take our place and be our substitute under what we deserve, the wrath and condemnation of God, and set us free. Free from the dominion and guilt of sin, and righteous in the eyes of God.

And this Jesus did not only in taking your place at the Jordan that day, but by then taking your place on the cross. Bound to that chair, He took the full jolt of God's wrath against your trespasses and sins. Strapped to that guernsey, He took the lethal injection of your sin. And He died in your place. The righteous judgment against your sin. That's how much He loves you.

But His love did not end there with His death - as it would if we would take somebody's place - but three days later we see that **all righteousness has indeed been fulfilled** when the bonds of death and the power of the grave are broken in Jesus' resurrection. When just as He stepped out of the Jordan *with* your sin, He now steps out of the grave *without* it. That not you, but your sin, be dead and buried forever.

That's why He is baptized. To die that you might live. And that's why *you* are baptized - to die that you might live. That you not die in your sin and so die forever, but that you die with Christ and so live forever! For that is what baptism does for you. It's not something we do; it's the work of Jesus continuing for us. The work that He began at the Jordan, continuing for all time. His heart still going out to us sinners.

That is what St. Paul explained for us today in the reading from Romans. That when you are baptized into Christ, you are baptized into His work for you, into His death and resurrection, that **just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father**, you too might be raised and **walk in newness of life**. Or in other words, just as Jesus stepped *into* the Jordan *with you*, you step *out* of the grave *with Him*. You rise with Him a new person, forgiven. Set free by your substitute to live a new life. Set free by your substitute, who has **fulfilled all righteousness** for you.

But as if that weren't enough, there is even more from Jesus, for you. For baptized into Jesus, He not only takes your place, *He gives you His*. And so when you are baptized into Jesus, for you, too, **the heavens are opened**; upon you, too, **the Spirit of God descends**; and to you, too, the Father says, **"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."** For just as the entire Trinity is present at Jesus' baptism, so He is at yours, as you are baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And He is there not just as a bystander, looking on at what you are doing, but as the One working and revealing what is happening in those waters. That heaven, once barred and sealed by your sin, now stands wide open to you.

That the gift of the Spirit, and the gifts that He brings with Him, are now given to you, to be with you always in this difficult world and life. And that you are now a child of God, dearly beloved, and one with whom your Father is well pleased.

And yes, your Father is well pleased with you. He may not always like what you do and how you act, but He loves you none the less. And His forgiveness is always here for you. The devil and the world will try to get you to doubt all that, and discourage you, and make you think you're not really a Christian at all because . . . well, look at you!

But do not listen to those voices, listen to your Father and the words He speaks today. And do not look at yourself for your worthiness, for you won't find any there; look instead at Jesus, who **fulfilled all righteousness** for you. And remember that you are a Christian not because of what you do, but because of what Jesus did for you. Because He came into our world as a baby. Because He came to the Jordan to be baptized. Because He went to the cross and rose from the dead. *That's* what makes you who you are. *That's who* makes you who you are.

And so when the devil and world get after you - and that's a *when*, not an *if!* - remember your baptism. When your sins torment you, say "I am baptized!" and remember your Father's forgiveness. When your body is failing you and the grave is yawning open before you, say "I am baptized!" and remember that as Christ was raised, so will you be. When you see someone in need, say "I am baptized!" and joyfully help. When you are sinned against, say "I am baptized!" and forgive them with the forgiveness you have received.

You are baptized! And that makes all the difference in the world. That is what we celebrate this day. Jesus' baptism, yes; but yours also. The Jesus unwrapped for us today by the Word of God was baptized for you and has given you this great gift. And what a treasure it is. *You are baptized into Christ!* In Him, you are new. In Him, you are forgiven. In Him, you are a child of God.

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.