

The Baptism of Our Lord C 2019, January 14, 2019, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22,
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For the past several weeks everything we have heard proclaimed here in worship has been prelude and prologue. Today all of the threads of the story reach a delightful conclusion. The longed-for anticipation of God's Messiah announced in Advent and the glorious song of the angels proclaiming the birth of the savior at Christmas all lead us to this moment; Jesus baptized by John in the Jordan river.

Do you know how you can tell when something reported in the Bible is really important? Count the number of times you hear about it. Four different gospels; four times the Baptism of Jesus is reported. Only two gospels tell us of his birth. It's hard to believe from the way we celebrate Christmas, but from the Bible's point of view Jesus' baptism is way more important than his birth.

In Advent we also heard about the birth of another young boy. The son of Zechariah and Elizabeth is John. Now he too is fully grown, baptizing people at the Jordan river as a sign of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. It seems some thought John was the long-awaited Messiah, but John knew differently. He was just the preparer, the one who was sent to get everyone ready.

Among those who came to be baptized by John was Jesus. Jesus himself didn't need to be baptized for his own sin. He has no sin. But his baptism is his first public act of solidarity with ordinary, sinful, people. This will mark the rest of Jesus' ministry. Jesus enters into our world, into our lives and shares with us our need for repentance and forgiveness, our need for healing and wholeness. In his baptism he signals the restoration of what is broken and the creation of new beginnings. This is why Jesus steps into the Jordan river and is washed in a flood of divine grace so that we might know God meets us where we most need to be met. God doesn't meet us in some ideal place where we dress up and put on our best behavior. Not when we try to fool everyone into thinking that we are better than we really are. But at the very place where we experience broken lives, failed commitments, and the disappointments we bring on ourselves by not living up to what God intends for us. It's a messy and very real human place to be. And that's where Jesus will always be found.

I believe that's why God the Father chose this moment to reveal Jesus as the Beloved Son of God and sealed by the coming of the Holy Spirit. Those who came to John to be baptized knew their only hope was to be found in God. They were drawn to this strange and fiery Baptist's preaching of judgment and forgiveness. The people came to realize their need for God's grace in their lives, a grace they could not provide for themselves. And it's here, in his Baptism, and at their greatest point of need, that God opens up the heavens and declares this Jesus to be his beloved Son.

And it is here, too, in this cleansing water of Holy Baptism, that God declares us to be daughters and sons of the living God. Here we are washed clean of sin, we die with Christ, we are raised to a new life joined with Christ. Our destiny is set for us here in baptism; the destination of the kingdom of God. Here we receive our calling, our vocation, to live as a royal priesthood, praising God through the Holy Spirit residing within the holy temple of our very bodies. Baptism becomes an indisputable fact of your own biography. Like your birthday you have it with you forever. Some people may never give it another thought throughout their whole life. But there is, and always will be, a moment in which God says, "You are my child, you belong to me, and you shall be forever."

Our baptism into Jesus Christ is meant by God to be a great source of comfort and strength. Because baptism is a fact and not a feeling, it's promises aren't subject to the ups and downs of our own emotions and the circumstances of our lives. We all go through dark moments in our lives. We all wonder if God is really there, does God really love us? We experience doubts and even periods when it seems that God is silent. At the worst moments of his life, those dark nights when he most doubted the love of God, Martin Luther turned to the promises God made to him in holy baptism. He clung to the Word of God which makes promises that can not be broken, because the man who makes those promises lives beyond death. Jesus' own baptism began in the Jordan River but it was completed on the cross. Dying and rising again is the hope of all who are brought to these waters. This is why Luther says that each day begins with a return to baptism. Each day we may begin with a precious reminder that we belong to Christ. We are his adopted sons and daughters, and baptism is our signed certificate that this is certainly true.

From this moment on Jesus will expand his ministry of love and mercy and reconciliation and forgiveness out into the world. It all begins here in baptism. And this is true for us, his church, his Body in the world. We begin our lives, our true lives in God in Holy Baptism. Here God makes indelible promises. But like Jesus, we are always moving out into the world, bringing the love and mercy and reconciliation of God to others. For Jesus his baptism was not a private and personal event. It was the beginning of a life of service lived for others. For us baptism is not private and personal, something only for inside a church. Baptism is our calling by God to live a life for others, for the whole world. "Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven." This is the charge given to us when we are baptized. To move outside of these four walls and bring the Good News to the world. Amen.