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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
The Baptism of Our Lord, Series A
Saturday, January 11th, 2014
Sunday, January 12th, 2014

Sermon: Jesus Stands for Sinners

Text: Matthew 3:13-17

Focus: At his Baptism, Jesus stood in the place of sinners to save us from our sins.

Function: That they would rejoice in God's baptismal grace and mercy.

Structure: Story-Interrupted

Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person..." (SC, 1st Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Each of the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—tells of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist at the River Jordan. The Fourth Gospel—John's Gospel—doesn't record Jesus' Baptism, although it does *hint* at it (John 1:29-34). No, if you want to get Jesus knee deep in river water, you must go to the Synoptics! The accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have much in common, but they also offer additional details the others lack. For instance, Luke tells us that Jesus *prayed* at his baptism (Luke 3:21). In Mark's Gospel, the voice from heaven is personal and directed to Jesus, not the crowds. Instead of "*This* is my beloved Son..." Mark records "*You* are my beloved Son; with *you* I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). And what about Matthew? Well, Matthew gives us this curious exchange between Jesus and John the Baptist:

"Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented" (Matt. 3:13-15, ESV).¹

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

What a strange conversation! This puzzling dialogue has captured the imaginations of theologians, writers, and preachers for over two-thousand years. What's going on here? Why was John the Baptist reluctant to baptize Jesus, and why did Jesus insist upon it?

What makes Jesus' baptism particularly difficult to understand is the stark contrast between who Jesus is and for whom John's baptism was intended. John the Baptist came preaching "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). John's baptism was a baptism of repentance—that is, a baptism *for sinners*! "I baptize you with water for repentance," John told the crowds. John's baptism was intended for God's lost nation of Israel to turn from its wicked ways, confess its sins, and receive God's forgiveness. John's baptism was a sinner's baptism.

And that's the trouble. Jesus was no sinner! He was the sinless Son of God! He didn't *need* to be baptized. He had no sins to repent of, and he had no need to be forgiven by God. What was there to forgive? Now, yes, Jesus was certainly fully human, but he was also fully God. He was the sinless Son of God. The New Testament strongly attests that Jesus was a man like us in every way—except he was *without* sin (Heb. 4:15). So the idea that Jesus somehow *needed* John's Baptism for himself is simply preposterous.

No wonder, then, that John tried to prevent Jesus from being baptized. "I need to be baptized by *you*," John said, "and do you come to *me*?" (Matt. 3:14).

The questions around Jesus' baptism matter because the answers bear on our own salvation. I have read and heard many explanations over the years. Most typical is this: Jesus was baptized in order to set us an example that we should be baptized. That's a fine response if view Baptism as an ordinance, not a sacrament. But we Lutherans—along with most Christians—regard Baptism as a means of God's grace, a special way in which God delivers to

us the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. In other words, Baptism is more than a mere symbol of decision and faith; Baptism is a miracle in which God actually *does* something! So please do not tell me Jesus got baptized just so we'd know we should get baptized too.

Perhaps Jesus was baptized in order to identify with his people Israel (that's actually getting closer to it!). Sinful Israel needed to receive John's Baptism of repentance, and in Matthew's Gospel Jesus represents Israel reduced to one. Recall Matthew's quotation of the prophet Hosea when the Holy Family returns from their flight to Egypt after escaping King Herod: "Out of Egypt I called my Son" (Matt. 2:15; Hos. 11:1). And here we almost have it...

But Matthew gives us the answer in his Gospel. It's all tied up in the name Jesus. "Then Jesus came from Galilee..." (Matt. 3:13). Dr. Jeff Gibbs, a professor at Concordia Seminary, points out that this is the first time in Matthew's Gospel that he uses the name Jesus since the visit of the magi in 2:1. Everywhere else in Matthew 2, Jesus is referred to simply as "the child" (e.g., 2:8-9, 20-21, etc.). The child! But now *Jesus* comes to be baptized. And Matthew parades that wonderful name in our faces, reminding us what the name means and why Jesus matters. For Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us" (Matt. 1:23), the one who "will save his people from their sins" (1:21).

Jesus *saves*! That's what his name means. That's what he came to do. And that's what he's always doing, even at his Baptism: saving his people from their sins. And that's why he came to be baptized by John in the Jordan River: to save us from *our* sins.

All of this was too much for John to take in. As usual, Jesus did not do what John expected (recall my sermon from a few weeks ago about John in prison in Matthew 11). John told his disciples:

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and

with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:11-12).

And then in the very next verse (3:13), Messiah shows up! Jesus comes from Galilee... But Jesus doesn't come with trumpets blaring and declaring his arrival. He doesn't come with an entourage or army. Where's the fire? Where's the winnowing fork? He doesn't even come with followers of his own. Instead, he comes to his lesser servant, John, and asks him to baptize him. *He—Jesus*, the sinless Son of God—asks to receive a sinner's baptism.

Why?! John wonders and tries to stop him.

But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15). Let it be so *now*. Baptize me *now*, John, and we'll take care of the fire and threshing floor later. But right now, Jesus had to be baptized in order “to fulfill all righteousness.”

When Jesus said he came to fulfill all righteousness, he knew that the words for righteousness and justification are related in Hebrew and Greek (unfortunately, this relationship is lost in translation in English versions of the Bible). Yes, it's true in the Bible that sometimes righteousness refers to the righteous deeds of God's people, but very often righteousness is used in parallel with God's righteous acts of salvation. In other words, righteousness and salvation are typically one and the same, particularly in the Psalms.

So when Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness, he came to *justify* all people, to *save* all people from their sins. Remember: Jesus' name means “The Lord saves.” That's what he came to do: to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). And in order to do that, he needed to identify with his people in baptism. So at his baptism, Jesus stood in the place of sinners, so he could save us from our sins.

That's why Jesus needed to undergo John's Baptism: not for himself, but *for you!* You see, at Jesus' Baptism, the sinless Son of God stands in the place of sinners and receives a sinner's baptism of repentance. Why would he do that? "To fulfill all righteousness." And in order to fulfill all righteousness, Jesus had to take our burden of sin upon himself and carry it to the cross. Jesus had to take our place if we were to be saved from sin, death, and the power of the devil.

You and I could not be there at the Jordan River to receive John's Baptism. We are born a little late for that! But *Jesus* was there! He received John's baptism of repentance in your place *for you!* "For our sake [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). In other words, Jesus took our place and *became* sin for us so we could become God's righteousness. That's why Jesus said, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). In order to fulfill all righteousness, Jesus had to take our place—in Baptism, on the cross, and in the tomb.

On Jordan's banks, Jesus took a stand and threw in his lot with sinners. He took our place in order to guarantee us a place with God forever. And that is very Good News! That proves to us that God will go to any lengths—no matter how humiliating—in order to save us from our sins. He would do anything and everything to make sure that we can enjoy a relationship with him here in time and forever in heaven. He'll go under the water for you. And he'll go underground for you. In fact, he did. Jesus died on the cross for our sins and was buried—underground. He took God's wrath in your place and the punishment for your sin *IN YOUR PLACE* and died for you. But death could not contain the perfect Son of God. Three days later he rose again from the grave to give you eternal life and salvation.

God is highly motivated to save you! And that's why he offers so many different ways to believe in his Son Jesus and receive his forgiveness: Holy Baptism, the preaching of the Gospel, the Word of Absolution, and the Lord's Body and Blood in his Supper. All of these are places in worship where Jesus stands and offers forgiveness to sinners like you and me.

God in Christ Jesus would do anything to save you from your sins. He already has. And he always will. Whatever it takes "to fulfill all righteousness," that's what Jesus does. That's where he stands. Let it be so forever and ever. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.