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Mark 1:4-11
The Baptism of Our Lord
January 10, 2021

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

Our text, And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Our first two readings today (from Genesis and Romans) quite noticeably carry the theme of "new beginnings" as a lead in to the Gospel reading. And, the Gospel reading begins with John the Baptist proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, certainly a "new beginning" for all who had ears to hear. However, this theme perhaps also reminds us that there *is* a bit of a difference between Jesus' baptism and our baptism – at least in its purpose. For, Christ doesn't need a new beginning, nor is His baptism to grant him a new beginning. Thus, we do well to consider this text in two parts: (a) what is Christ's baptism all about? And (b) what does it mean that we are given a new beginning in Christ Jesus?

First, then, what is Christ's baptism all about? As a member reminded me this past week (for I myself sometimes forget the illustrations by which I have explained the faith), she reminded me that I have previously pointed out that at Christmas we celebrate

and meditate upon the incarnation and humanity of the Christ, and in Epiphany we celebrate and meditate upon the divinity of the Christ. And certainly that is the case here in Jesus' baptism.

When we consider why Jesus is baptized, we cannot conclude that John baptized him for the same reason John baptized others. John baptized others, our text says, "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," but also, the Scriptures say, as the forerunner, to prepare the way of the Lord and point sinners to him. And so, as the Christ comes, John says, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes upon himself the sin of the world."

And its that last phrase that helps us understand why Jesus was baptized... to take upon himself the sin of the world... or, as Jesus himself says, "let it be so now, to fulfill all righteousness." He, the righteous substitute, He the sin-bearer, He the Messiah sent from God, comes (if you will) to be "certified" as such in His baptism.

The Spirit descends upon him and the voice comes from heaven, "You are my beloved Son," and through these sights and sounds the Triune God is plainly known; but also, through these sights and sounds, Jesus is "certified" as the Messiah. For, recall, it was the Messiah upon whom the Lord would place his Spirit ("My Servant in whom my soul delights; I will put my spirit upon him..." citation)... and it was the Messiah of whom the Lord says in the psalm that we used for our introit today, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you," that the Messiah may fulfill all those righteous

words of that psalm, “I will tell of the decree. The LORD said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you.”

And not only does this show Jesus’ divinity (as Epiphany does), but it also points us to the riches of that psalm, which detail what belongs to this Jesus whom we follow, that we might have confidence and trust in him no matter what befalls us. The Father says to him, “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” And, if that’s what the Father promises His Son, and anoints him in that certain authority over all nations (so that the Father even warns the nations, “Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling, for his wrath is quickly kindled”)... if that’s Jesus authority over the nations and his status as the Son of God, then we may also have confidence and trust in him over and above any supposed lord or god with which the nations may entice us or any authority which they would claim to have over us... which gives us great reason to cling to this Jesus, for “blessed are all who take refuge in him.” Refuge in him, not because he promises to overthrow the nations temporally, nor because his kingdom is of this world, but rather because the Church is called out of this world and unto this Christ so that, with eyes and heart focused on the inheritance and homeland to come, minds and hearts may remain calm in all of our troubles, despair of ourselves and all

self-reliance, and rejoice in the safety of that baptism into the life of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And that brings us to the second part in considering this text: what does it mean we are given a new beginning in Christ Jesus?

We often put too much hope in “new beginnings” and our ability to start over. A new year’s resolution says, “We’ll start over on January 1 and do better next year,” and usually doesn’t. A country says, “We’ll start over with a new leader and all will be well,” and it’s usually the same old rancor and division. A Christian even says, “I’ll start over with and improve upon my prayers and penance, my good works, my decisions for Jesus,” and it is of no value when it is a hope of self-righteousness in which God finds favor, or a hope that – by his own will-power – the Christian will increase his faith and strengthen his relationship with God.

We often forget that starting over for the Christian, new beginnings for the Christian, isn’t about improving the old Adam, it’s about God graciously giving birth to the new Adam. He does that in baptism, and there in baptism ties us directly to Jesus, with whom He is well-pleased. And being tied to Christ, and to the promises that Christ is the one who fulfills all righteousness, Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, Christ is the One to whom the Lord promised the nations as his heritage and the ends of the earth his possession and said, “Blessed are all who take refuge in him,” ... tied to Christ in baptism is the new beginning that is needed.

That's exactly what Paul says in our epistle reading: "You must also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Notice that all-important last phrase, "in Christ Jesus." That being attached to Christ and his all-defining merit and salvation is what St Paul points you to when he says, "Circumcision and uncircumcision no longer means anything, but (in baptism replacing circumcision) a new creation." There's what matters, a new creation.

Now, again, Christians make the mistake of thinking it is in their power to enact this new creation. But, as Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation."

"Well, great!" the Christian says. "I'll just make myself in Christ Jesus – more fervent prayers, a more holy living, a new start, a new beginning – then, having made myself in Christ Jesus, I will be a new creation!"

But you are not the author of the new creation. You have no power to enact it or be born from above. The new creation can only come from the same one who authored the first creation. "In the beginning, God created." And again, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."... so that, of that Word made flesh, the voice calls from heaven, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased", and the Spirit alights upon this One who, there with the Father and the Spirit from the first beginning, has authority and righteousness and the messianic

mission of sacrifice upon the cross to usher in the new beginning, the new testament, the new creation.

And, thus, if you are tied to him by baptism, then your whole life depends upon baptism. By that I do not mean, your whole life depends on just “checking off the box” of that one-time birth through the watery act, never to be nourished and fed and sustained. How many there are (!) who use their God-given birth of the new Adam as license to think that they may continue to live according to the old Adam! Indeed, tempted Christians have always had to be reminded that baptism is now your entire life! St Paul rhetorically asks,

“Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin (by the baptismal act of God-given birth) still live in sin? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death (which ushered in the sealed new testament), in order that (meaning, for the express purpose that), just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

Yes, we are to walk according to the faith that we are already (by grace, through faith) members of the new creation, sharers of and inheritors of the new testament that Christ has bestowed upon us by his righteous death upon the cross, that death of the divine One in whom the Father was well-pleased.

Now, this may seem to sort of beg the question, “Well, isn’t this just a roundabout way of saying the Christian has to continually

have new beginnings of baptismal self-improvement in order to make sure he is walking in newness of life?" Not at all. For baptism never needs a new beginning. To claim you must always have new beginnings is to claim that baptism fails you. But, God's gift of baptism is never broken apart by sin.

Imagine the image of a boat. A Christian constantly trying to make new beginnings is repeatedly claiming that his previous boat has been shipwrecked and sunk. In fact, the church father Jerome infamously steered Roman Catholicism in the wrong direction by claiming that a meritorious penance was needed because the ship of baptism is broken apart by the waves of our sin, and we must either wait for a second ship to come along (penance) or, to use the shipwreck imagery, must cling to the floating driftwood and by that "second plank" of penance make our way back to God, almost as swimming to shore by our own strength for a new beginning.

But baptism doesn't break apart, nor does it ever fail you and require a new beginning apart from the new birth God has already given you in the ark of baptism. Make no mistake, that baptism is indeed a new birth, a new start. In fact, the reference to the ark is helpful and God intends it be prophetic when, after the flood, Noah opened the covering of the ark and saw the new creation on the very first day of the new year. The Scriptures say "In the 601st year, first month, first day of that first month." . What a new start for Noah in

the new creation to which he was transported by the safety of that ark.

How much more so your baptism – the first day of your new life in Christ Jesus. Baptized into his death, nothing need be added, nor can the merits of his death ever be stripped away, and thus the ship of baptism is never wrecked, but holds you safely as you prepare to enter that new creation. God’s promises stand forever, and so does his promise that you are his child, justified by the blood of Christ. And that justification remains all your days.

If you are to understand a continual return to your baptism, a continual repentance, forgiveness, fresh start, it may be said – if you will - of *sanctification*... yes, your next round of wrestling against the temptations caused by the devil, the world, and your sinful self may start anew, but that doesn’t mean your justification does!

So, when sin attacks and you fall out of the boat... the boat is not lost... nor are you lost... for the Lord throws lifeline of repentance and forgiveness and by Absolution brings you back into the undamaged boat and by the Holy Supper strengthens your seat in that boat (straps you in tighter!) that you may be well-prepared the next time a wave slams against the side of the boat and you *fear* (a paranoia about, and lack of faith in, the certainty of God’s baptismal promises) ...you *fear* the boat will be lost.

No, never lost. That eight-sided vessel of the new creation is steadfast and stalwart. Just as certain as the new week begins on the

8th day, equally certain is the new life that is yours in baptism. In the ark, eight souls in all were saved. In circumcision on the 8th day, the child was made a child of the covenant. In baptism, the greater ark, the greater circumcision, you have truly been made new by being given a new Adam attached to Christ Jesus, the second Adam and the perfect substitute for the first Adam and all his descendants of the Fall.

Thus, rejoice in and live in the certainty of that new creation. Our font is eight-sided to remind you your life in Christ *began* there. Our pulpit is eight-sided to remind you your life is nourished and strengthened there. I suppose to confess the resurrection our tombs could be eight-sided, but it doesn't matter, because you won't forever remain there... for, having been baptized into Christ's death, you will rise with Him in the resurrection.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
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