

Mark 1:4-11
The Baptism of Our Lord
January 7, 2024

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

Our text, the Gospel reading from St Mark, recording the baptism of Christ this way: “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,

During Advent, we heard the first two-thirds of this text, meditating upon the preparatory work of John and even considering the relationship between John’s baptism and Jesus’ baptism. And, we considered at the time, how the baptisms are not so much ‘different,’ as much as John was saying, “I baptize with water as I am authorized by a greater authority to do; He who comes after me comes *with* that authority, *is* that authority... *He’s* the One who gives charge to the Holy Spirit, for He is the One who is in communion with the Holy Spirit and the Father.”

That is what we see today, isn’t it, in Jesus’ baptism. Jesus was not baptized for the same reason you and I are baptized; but His baptism shows His authority to give meaning to our baptisms, and that meaning and comfort is grounded in Jesus’ relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

In the beginning, the Holy Spirit hovered over the face of the first creation's waters, while the Father created the creation through the power of 'the Word who was with God and was God,' that Word being the Son Himself. This is what we hear of in our Old Testament reading... that the first creating moments of the old creation was the Lord creating a large bowl of water, blessed by the presence of the Holy Spirit hovering over it. And, with that Spirit-blessed water, the Word was joined and the old creation was spoken into existence by the power of the Word at work (you might say, 'with' the water), and God looked at all He made and declared it very good.

But now, after that good creation has been so harmed by sin so as to be rendered an old and dead creation... now, in our gospel reading, it's time for the salvation of mankind *out of* the old creation and *into* the new creation. And that can only happen if the Word and the Spirit are again together at work. And so, the Word is again joined with the water, and the Spirit again hovers over the water and alights upon the Word-made-flesh, and the Father calls from heaven that this is very good; with this He is well-pleased, for the Word-made-flesh is on His mission to redeem mankind and make all things new.

Now, this scene says something about Jesus' baptism and about ours. Regarding Jesus' baptism, we ought learn to cherish

that He came in full righteousness – “Let it be so now to fulfill all righteousness,” he told John. That ought not be translated to say Jesus was trying to fulfill baptism as ‘law;’ rather, Jesus knew the necessity of His baptism was not about covering unrighteousness of his own, but about his actively being proclaimed by God in heaven to be the righteous substitute for our unrighteousness. Jesus’ baptism made known to us not only His Messianic mission, but also His authority to institute our baptism... in fact, made known the whole relationship of the Triune Godhead, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and thereafter gives us clear understanding of the communication and relationship within that divine mystery of the Three-Yet-One: the Father sends the Son, the Son is the Messiah who does the Father’s bidding, and the Holy Spirit points to the Son, is “upon the Son,” and makes the Son known as the Savior of the world. All of that is first clearly seen in the baptism of our Lord, so that we have a better understanding of the communication within the Godhead when He first declared, “Let us make man in our image” ... and when He later planned, “Let us redeem man back into our image.”

And, if that is what the Lord’s baptism teaches us about Him and about the Holy Trinity into which we are baptized (“I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

Holy Spirit”), then the Lord’s baptism also teaches us much about our own baptism, beginning with our need for it:

You and I need this baptism of Jesus. He doesn’t need it, but He receives it to undertake a great exchange – He in His baptism takes on all our sin – “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away [by taking upon himself] the sin of the world”, John points – and, in exchange, in our baptism covers us with all His righteousness. Of yourself, sinful and unclean. In Christ, declared righteous. Of yourself, sins of thought, word, deed, all to be condemned. In Christ, declared righteous. This is what it means to be baptized “in the name of Jesus”... not that such a phrase challenges the Trinitarian formula used in the baptismal act... but that such a phrase paraphrases whose righteousness and teaching covers us.

And he covers us in all His righteousness precisely because He knows the depth of our unrighteousness. I would venture to guess that many-a-sermon this morning are comparing as illustration the new birth of baptism to the new beginning of each new year. Be careful with that analogy, for it can dangerously teach baptism as a self-improvement of sorts. Our unrighteousness apart from and before baptism was so deep and so thorough that there could be no sense of ‘us making a better start.’ In fact, such a view often incorrectly assumes that baptism

is about helping Old Adam start over, become righteous, improve, do better at earning his salvation.

But, baptism and its resulting baptismal life is not about improving Old Adam; it's about disowning, drowning, and destroying Old Adam and recognizing that the baptized is a new creation completely attached to and identified by Christ Jesus. Jesus does not rescue Old Adam, but destroys Old Adam in favor of the New Adam to which baptism gives birth, that (St Paul says) we may walk in the newness of life.

Consider it this way: in His baptism, Jesus took on all which Old Adam had ruined since destroying that *first* "it is very good" declaration of God. Jesus took on himself all of the Old Adam and dragged him to the cross and paid for his sin there. Jesus is not about helping Old Adam, but about crucifying him on the cross of Calvary, as St Paul says, "We know that our old self was crucified with Christ in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin."

This was the ransoming work of the cross. Christ pardoned us from all the guilt of Old Adam, and covered us in His blood and righteousness, that out of that the New Adam may be born and walk in the newness of life. How does Luther's hymn say it (as we just sang)?:

All that the mortal eye beholds is water as we pour it.
Before the eye of faith unfolds the pow'r of Jesus' merit,
For here it sees the crimson flood to all our ills bring healing;
The wonders of His precious blood the love of God revealing,
Assuring His own pardon.

Assuring us His own pardon, freeing us from enslavement to sin, declaring us righteous because of *His* meritorious sacrifice and by His blood-soaked grace. St Paul says in our Epistle Reading that you were baptized into Christ's *death* – in other words, baptized into His substitutionary sacrifice. You are therefore not baptized into your own righteousness, but into His righteousness, which He handed over to God for your sake and your salvation.

But, because baptism is so unequivocally 'by grace,' a gift of God's declaration over us, many are offended by it, offended that they and their pious efforts would be left out of the equation of salvation. They reject baptism as 'too easy,' as 'the way of the lazy,' as 'an excuse to remain a sinner.' And, thus, they turn baptism into their work, an ordinance of God which must be committed to and achieved by the one who has dedicated himself to saving himself by his great faith. That one turns the phrase "walk in newness of life" into meritorious obedience: "How is your faith walk?" Be not mistaken: such is nothing other than a rejection of baptism, so that as Luther's hymn says,

[W]oe to those who cast aside this grace so freely given;
They shall in sin and shame abide and to despair be driven.
For born in sin, their works must fail, their striving saves them never;
Their pious acts do not avail, and they are lost forever,
Eternal death their portion.

On the other hand, to abuse the gift of baptismal new creation, to not protect the New Adam from the sin of Old Adam, but rather to urge the New Adam to indulge in the sin of Old Adam, is not the contrition that rejoices in the Lord's invitatory gift. The Lord did not send out the Twelve to baptize you into licentiousness, but to baptize you into the new creation that loves righteousness and daily prays to be conformed by the renewal of your mind unto a life that confesses and rejoices in God's holy will. Recall, the famous line of another baptismal hymn: "So use it well; you are made new, in Him a new creation." (Not an 'improved' creation, a *new* creation... no longer captive to the old Adam, or even 'naturally influenced' by him, but rather harassed by him as a stranger, an invader upon and enemy of your new life in Christ). Yes, in Christ, a new creation.

In other words, just as the Spirit hovered over that watery bowl of the first creation and God brought forth life through the creative power of His Word, so again baptism is a very *creating* work of God. Just as active as the Lord was in the six days of the Old Creation, equally active was He on the day He used water and

the Word to make you His new creation. And, as He gave the first Adam to be faithful steward of that first creation, He now gives you to tend to your life of the new creation He has given you (yes, to *work* – to tend to your life righteously, to walk in the newness of life – is a holy thing). God did not create Adam to lay around in the garden, but to tend to it. Likewise, God did not baptize you into a new creation so that you might lay around in ‘holy sloth.’ Be a good steward of those vocations which He has entrusted to you. Rejoice in His will; love your neighbor; care for the household of faith... not because you are trying to earn your salvation or trying to improve Old Adam, but because you have been freely given your salvation, with Christ’s righteousness and merit covering, binding, and snuffing out Old Adam. Such is the great treasure of holy baptism and the baptismal life.

Thus, we have in Christ’s baptism the comfort and assurance regarding ours. In His Baptism, He opens to you all of heaven; in your baptism, He applies to you and bestows upon you all of heaven. In His Baptism, the Father declares the Son’s authority; and in your baptism He blesses you through that authority, just as (a final time) we hear Luther’s great Baptismal hymn confess:

To His disciples spoke the Lord, “Go out to ev’ry nation,
And bring to them the living Word and this My invitation:

Let ev'ryone abandon sin and come in true contrition
To be baptized and thereby win full pardon and remission
And heav'nly bliss inherit."

And, heavenly bliss inherit. Whenever baptism is performed,
heaven opens, and the Spirit – gifted by the Father and the Son –
alights on the baptized, now an adopted child of God, and brings
to him the full inheritance of heavenly bliss.

Thus, delight in Christ's baptism; for, it connects the first
creation to the new, and it gives you every comfort and support
to know that – just as authoritative was the Word in the first
beginning, so also in your new beginning... that you may use it
well, live in it well, in Him a new creation.

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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