

BAPTIZED

Matthew 3:1-17

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

January 20, 2019

Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards

Traditionally, the Second Sunday after Epiphany, usually the second Sunday of the New Year, is designated as the festival of the Baptism of our Lord.

Annually, it is suggested by the worship experts of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) that pastors utilize this occasion as an opportunity to deepen worshippers' understanding of the meaning and purpose of baptism for themselves and the Church.

If possible, pastors are also encouraged to designate this festival occasion for baptisms.

However, there is significant merit for pastors, like myself, to keep our focus on the scriptural foundation for baptism, as well as its function in our individual and community lives as disciples of Jesus.

This year's assigned readings from Matthew's Gospel in the Narrative Lectionary complies with our Lutheran liturgical calendar, as we come to Jesus' next-to-last event in His preparation for public ministry as Israel's Messiah, God's Anointed One.

In this Christmas cycle, beginning in Advent, we have read through Matthew's first two chapters, establishing Jesus' pedigree, identity, and claim to His Messianic title – Son of David.

Through His baptism by John in the Jordan River, Jesus is formally commissioned and anointed for the mission of restoration and salvation, for which He has been called and prepared by God.

Israel's kings were merely anointed with oil.

But Jesus is anointed with the Holy Spirit, which gently descends upon Him in the form of a dove.

The brief baptism narrative ends with the voice of God speaking these words of investiture:

“This is My Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (3:17).

As we heard at the outset of today's reading, the Lord commissioned John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus' public ministry.

John proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was coming, and his audience needed to

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven was near” (3:2).

John spoke with a voice and a fervor like that of the great prophets. His attire, diet, and locale reminded his hearers of Elijah, who Malachi prophesied some four hundred years before, would appear as the forerunner of the Messiah. No wonder crowds traveled for days and distance to hear Israel's first prophet in four centuries. The people listened and confessed their sins, and John baptized them in the Jordan River.

Some Jews, full of hope that the Messiah would soon come, questioned aloud whether or not John might be the Christ.

No, John emphatically declared, he was a voice preparing the way of the Messiah.

He said in no uncertain terms,

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry His sandals.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (3:11).

John's message of repentance must have been a shock to those who heard him.

Here before them was no rabbi, reasoning and giving options, no priest, leading a ritual, no scribe, proscribing adherence to the law.

John spoke with a thundering voice, demanding a new relationship with God.

What does repentance mean for John?

Normally, repentance calls for an ongoing and complete change of mind.

Originally it implied an intellectual transformation, drawing from the Jewish concept that demanded a lifestyle change, along with the urgent message to “turn around” while there is still time.

This is similar to the type of message, or warning, that patients with high cholesterol or sugar counts might hear from physicians, or a young person considering drug use or suicide might receive from a loved one or counselor.

In the Old Testament, repentance also signified a radical return to God for those who had broken their covenant.

The idea was that of turning from sin to God in every area of their lives and being.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ preached repentance as the necessary prerequisite for entering the Kingdom.

Until the sinner turned from self and sin to God, there could be no forgiveness.

Moreover, true repentance involves a total change, a transformation, that affects not just the mind, but also the heart, and is manifested by a new lifestyle and character.

Today, as well as in the First Century, there are too many half-hearted followers, who talk the talk, but do not walk the walk.

People are more oriented toward taking care of themselves, rather than their souls.

In the second portion of this passage, Matthew narrates:

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan 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 it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’

Then he consented” (3:13-14).

John says this, because he knows who Jesus is — that He is the sinless Messiah — and, therefore, need not repent.

Jesus, Himself, will ***“baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire”*** (3:11).

When John balks at Jesus’ request for baptism, Jesus offers a reason for His request —

“to fulfill all righteousness.”

This phrase has been variously interpreted.

The key word for us here is *“righteousness,”* which is a central term for Matthew.

In the Old Testament and other Jewish writings, righteousness is used for human character and behavior.

It also referred to God’s character as well.

For Jesus, righteousness refers to a person’s ethical response to God, as in obeying and doing God’s righteous will.

Jesus’ response to John, ***“Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill righteousness,”*** signifies that it is God’s will that Jesus be baptized by John, despite Jesus’ superiority to him.

Therefore, they must obey it.

The very first words Jesus ever says in the Gospel reveal the most characteristic feature of who Jesus is: Jesus the Messiah is the Son of God, who humbly obeys the will of God.

Immediately after Jesus’ baptism by John, this is what the Heavenly Voice authenticates by saying, that all who are present can hear, ***“This is My Beloved Son.”***

Matthew presents this scene as a public announcement to the bystanding crowd, in contrast to the other Gospels (Mark and Luke), which describe the event as a private vision to Jesus.

The difference in the wording of the Heavenly Voice confirms this.

In Mark and Luke, the Voice addresses Jesus in this manner, ***“You are My Beloved Son.”***

Matthew has Jesus being addressed this way: ***“This is My Beloved Son.”***

Why does Matthew present the heavenly proclamation as a public revelation?

It is because in the Gospel of Matthew, humble obedience is the essence of discipleship.

For discipleship, too, demands a life of doing God’s will.

Permit me to turn now from John's baptism of Jesus to Jesus' baptism, which is part of the Great Commission at the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel.

There, Jesus will tell His gathered apostles to go and make disciples, and to baptize them ***"in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"*** (28:19).

The Great Commission charged the disciples to perform missionary work, to take the Gospel to the pagan world, to peoples who had their own religious beliefs, moral codes and rites.

In Jesus' baptism by ***"the Holy Spirit and with fire,"*** there is cleansing and union with Christ, along with the forgiveness of sins.

It means that the baptized have received Jesus as Messiah, Savior, and Lord.

The Apostle Paul will become the baptismal theologian of the New Testament.

Those who participate in our upcoming Bible study of Paul's greatest letter, Romans, will clearly see this.

It is Paul who teaches that being baptized into Christ means being baptized into His death and resurrection.

Through baptism, we, too, spiritually experience Christ's burial and resurrection, which becomes our sure hope that we shall live with Him forever.

Because of our freedom from sin and death in baptism, we are free to live for Christ in service to others.

For Martin Luther, baptism is the sacrament of salvation.

God acted in Christ to save us.

God acts in baptism to save us.

Our salvation is by His grace.

We receive it through faith, thus the great Lutheran slogan: by grace, through faith.

Faith is our God-given capacity to perceive God at work in the person of Jesus, and in the waters of baptism.

Furthermore, faith is our capacity to receive what God offers us in Christ and in baptism.

Beloved people of God,

baptism is also the sacrament of the Holy Spirit.

Through baptism, we receive the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, and the directive to use them to build up Christ's body — the Church.

It is the Spirit Jesus promised His Church, which enables it to carry on His mission to the world.

Because we live in Christ, the Son of God, we are God's daughters and sons — God's adopted and beloved children.

We share the right of children to speak to their Father in intimate terms — *Abba*.

We share the inheritance of the coming kingdom.

Baptism is for life, this life that we live in the mortal flesh, and the life to come in the Kingdom of Heaven.

AMEN