

What's the Big Deal About Baptism?
Andrew Kneeland, January 15, 2022
Matthew 3:13-17

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our Gospel text this morning picks up the story of Jesus from where we left off last week. Matthew tells us the story about Jesus being born, the wise men coming to visit, and Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt to keep Jesus safe from Herod.

Mary, Joseph, and Jesus returned to Nazareth in Matthew 2, and Matthew 3 picks up many years later. We don't learn much about Jesus' childhood; his toddler years, being a young kid who ran around town and played with the other kids, being a teenager who learned carpentry alongside his earthly father, being a young man who continued to grow in wisdom and stature.

We're not told many of those details. We have to imagine what those 20 or 25 years in Nazareth might have looked like. Because the next story here in Matthew 3 takes place when Jesus is about 30 years old. He is about to begin what we call his three years of public ministry; the few years that Jesus spent walking the countryside with his 12 disciples, teaching, talking, and healing.

Before he became a public figure, though, Jesus needed to do two things: be baptized, and be tempted.

We're going to talk about the Baptism of Jesus today, something that I think is very often confused and misunderstood.

Let's pray before we begin: *Father God, thank you for your Word and for this story about Jesus. Teach us your truth today, remove distractions and obstacles, we ask in your holy name, amen.*

Let's look back at Matthew 3, this short passage about the Baptism of Jesus. Verse 13: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him."

Jesus wanted to be baptized. Now, this should probably make us raise an eyebrow as we read this story. Because when we think of baptism the first thing—the very first thing we should think of—is that verse in 1 Peter 3: "Baptism now saves you."

We are a Lutheran church, we know baptism is how we are washed clean of our sins, adopted into God's family of grace and forgiveness. Saved for eternal life.

But if baptism saves you, why did Jesus go to John the Baptist in order to be

baptized? We can understand John's confusion in verse 14: "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'"

John's saying: "no no no, I can't baptize YOU. If anything YOU should be the one baptizing ME." "But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.'"

There are TWO things we can learn about baptism from this text today, and John's confusion here shows us the first thing: Baptism is not something WE do, baptism is something GOD does.

I think most of us have been able to watch a baptism take place. For our three kids, Esther's dad was able to baptize Titus, my dad baptized Leah, and I was able to baptize Arlo a couple of years ago. You may not remember who performed your baptism, and that's totally fine. Because GOD is the one doing the work in a baptism.

Listen to this quote, from Luther in the Large Catechism: "The Scriptures teach that if we piled together all the works of all the monks in a heap, no matter how precious and dazzling they might appear, they would still not be as noble and good as if God were to pick up a straw. Why? Because the person performing the act is nobler and better."

It's a pastor, usually, who says the words and handles the water and leads the prayer, but God is the one acting. The words being said are God's Words, and we know that God's Words are powerful and special. When God speaks, things happen.

When you were baptized it was performed by human hands, but you can know confidently that it was GOD who baptized you. God is the one doing the work in baptism.

But that makes this account in Matthew 3 even more confusing. If baptism is a work of God, and if Jesus IS God, why did Jesus need to be baptized at all?

The answer is: He didn't. Some say Jesus needed to be baptized in order to purify Himself, or in order to fulfill the Old Testament ceremonial commands about priests being cleaned before they served God. But I'm truth the words "baptism" and "requirement" do not belong together because baptism is Gospel, not Law. Baptism is where you receive things, and Jesus did not need to receive anything. He already had everything.

Jesus did say to John, "We must carry out all that God requires," but Jesus wanted to show us that baptism isn't a requirement to fulfill but a gift to receive.

Jesus didn't *need* to be baptized. He *wanted* to because He wanted to

experience everything we experience. He wanted to put himself in our circumstances, walk alongside us through our journey of life. This is where Jesus signifies that he is ready and able to take the place of every sinner who would ever live. He would take the full weight and load of every sinner's sin upon his own shoulders, starting here.

Verse 16: "And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'"

This is the second point Matthew helps us understand here about baptism. First, baptism is where God works, and second, baptism is where we receive gifts from God.

Jesus was holy and perfect and didn't need to receive anything from God. But the Father sent a dove to show us that what happens in baptism is special and extraordinary.

Baptism may look like a simple thing. It might look like a basic ceremony that includes nothing more than a few words, some choreographed actions, and a prayer. Just sprinkling some water on somebody's head, or dunking somebody into a pool or a river. It's just water, right? We use water every day. Water is simple and basic.

But something God created and commands cannot be simple and basic. Baptism is a powerful and special thing.

Baptism is not just water. Baptism is water AND the words and promises of God. THAT'S what makes baptism so special.

Luther says "this treasure (of baptism) is greater and nobler than heaven and earth." "In it we receive an inexpressible treasure." "The power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of baptism is that it saves... To be saved is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, to enter into Christ's kingdom, and to live with him forever."

When somebody is baptized in the name of the Trinity—a baby, a teenager, an adult, there is no difference—this is a great victory against the devil. One more soul is stolen from Satan's clutches. One more soul is adopted into Christ's holy family. One more soul is given spiritual strength and power.

When you're baptized you are immediately given forgiveness of all of your sins. You immediately have peace with God, you immediately have purpose in life, you immediately have hope even when the world burns and rages against you.

A baptism is a joyous celebration, but it is also a sobering thing. When a person is baptized they become lifelong enemies of Satan. They suddenly receive the devil's undivided attention and a lifetime of unrelenting attacks and opposition. It's a serious thing, to be baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But we know that it is also a wonderful, blessed thing.

Paul wrote to baptized believers in 1 Corinthians, saying: "You are not lacking in any gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

Baptism is something God does, and baptism is where we receive gifts from God. "Baptism now saves you."

Of course, this probably isn't news to many of us. Many of us have been attending Lutheran churches our entire lives, and our pastors have regularly talked about baptism and reminded us what baptism is. So why should we hear about it again?

In fact, why should we ever repeat the truths we already know? In my preaching I always talk about Jesus and how his death and resurrection brings us forgiveness and eternal life. That's the most basic point in our entire faith: Jesus forgives our sins. We all know that is true. So why do I keep talking about it?

Two reasons. First, we are forgetful people. The word "remember" occurs in the Old Testament almost 170 times. We all know the truths of our faith, we say the Apostle's Creed together every single Sunday; we KNOW what we believe. But we tend to forget it as soon as we walk out of these church doors. It's easy to believe in Christ and trust his promises while we're sitting here in church. It's exceptionally difficult to remember that Jesus loves and died for us when we're at home alone and are tempted to think negatively about ourselves. It's exceptionally difficult to remember that we have been adopted into the holy family of God when we're on the phone with a friend and are tempted to spread gossip about somebody else. It's exceptionally difficult to remember that we are equipped and empowered by the almighty and all-powerful Holy Spirit when we want to curl up and disappear when we are facing a difficult challenge or trial.

We need to be reminded of these Gospel realities every week because we are forgetful people. But we also need to hear these reminders because these aren't ordinary words. When you hear that Jesus died for your sins—when you hear me

say those words—it's not like hearing a motivational speech or an inspirational message.

When I tell you, "Baptism saves you and you are a baptized and loved child of God"—your faith grows as you remember WHO you are and WHOSE you are. Your heart is drawn closer to your Heavenly Father, and your spiritual muscles and armor are strengthened. Just hearing and believing these words does that!

We don't come to church to DO something. We come to church for the same reason we come to the baptismal font: to GET something. Church is not a social club. Church is not primarily about our friendships with each other. Church is where we receive gifts from God.

We receive the body of blood of Christ that washes us clean from our sins and strengthens us to live our lives. We receive the promises of the Gospel. And Church is where you were first baptized into this eternal, heavenly family of God.

But baptism is not just something that happened once, long ago. It is a gift for our present lives too! One theologian wrote: "Baptismal grace constantly flows over us as the Holy Spirit works new life through the Gospel, strengthens our faith, and blesses us with forgiveness. We live in our baptism when we live in Christ's forgiveness."

We begin our services here at Gloria Dei with the words, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." This isn't a full sentence; it's purposefully incomplete. This is called an Invocation, and it's the same words that were spoken over you at your baptism.

The first thing we do in service every week is help you remember your baptism. Help you remember that you are a precious and holy and loved child of God.

Amen.