

## Sermon Baptism of our Lord 2020

January 12, 2019

Matthew 3:13-17

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the baptism of Jesus.

As you all hopefully know, Monday was the feast of Epiphany, the day after the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, when Christmas officially ended and the Season of Epiphany began. I try to make this point every year, I think, but the season of Epiphany is about Jesus being manifest as God in the flesh. As we say in the Epiphany hymn, "Songs of Thankfulness and Praise," He is "God in man made manifest." So here in this season, we have this child, this God with us, born in the manger at Christmas, being shown to be just that: God with us.

However, something really struck me this year. As I was studying those readings for Epiphany, and heard the preaching of Epiphany at the Circuit service Monday night I was really struck by the point that this Jesus coming is monumental in large part because it means salvation for all peoples. What I mean is this: when you note the coming of the Magi, the wise men, to see Jesus, that's a big deal because these men are not Jews. These aren't Jews, just coming to worship their king. No, these are Gentiles coming to worship the Jewish King. Up to this point the blessing of God, the choice of God, you could even say, had been to give salvation to the Jews. Now, that's not to say that someone who wasn't Jewish by blood couldn't be saved, they could as what was called a proselyte, but the Jewish people were chosen as the people of the Lord. But when Jesus came, this salvation was opened to all peoples. And this is, like I said, monumental. This is a massive paradigm shift.

I've said before but I think this is something we don't process enough because we are just so used to it. Yes, God's salvation is for everyone. Yes, God loves everyone. Yes, God has sent Jesus even for my sins and my being a gentile has no bearing on that forgiveness. Now, as I've said, on the one hand that we don't think about this is sort of a good thing. It's good for us to rest in the promises of God and not doubt them due to our heritage. That's good. We don't want Christians asking if they're really saved even though they're not Jewish. So that's good. But there are some problems with this if we just take it for granted. One problem, I think is reflected in a question that I found asked this week.

Now as I say I found this question asked, it was actually in a journal article that I got in the mail, but it was a very interesting arrival considering how this issue had been mulling around in my head. The question was this: "Why are the BC Scriptures Necessary for the AD Church?" In other words, since we as the Church know this Jesus as Lord, really as THE

LORD, the true God in the flesh, why do we need the Old Testament, the Scriptures before Christ?

Now this article had a number of great reasons in it, many of which will be alluded to in things that I'll say in the rest of the sermon, but I think one that was extremely important is that it says that these Scriptures give us language to talk about God. What does it mean? Well, what the author said is that it's in the Old Testament that we are given the language to understand God as the God who has anger and wrath at sin. It's there that we learn that sin requires atonement, death, the shedding of blood. It's there that we see that as we experience these things, they come as a consequence of sin. Now, as I say that, it's not as though we can't learn about these things from the New Testament, but it's in the Old that we see how foundational these are for understanding God. It's there that we see that we have sinned against God, this sin has made Him angry, and therefore the consequence of that anger is death which requires the loss of life, the shedding of blood.

I think this point is so pertinent because of how we talk about God so much in our religious culture. Think about it. If you went up to a random person on the street and told them that they deserved God's wrath, His temporal and eternal punishment, as we say it in the prayer, how would they respond? That's sort of anathema, isn't it? "You can't say that about God?! That's judgmental! Didn't God say not to judge anyone because you can't see their heart?!" You see we've grasped on so much to the idea that God is love, that we've extracted a real consequence to sin. But this is what we see in the whole of the Bible. The Bible gives us this worldview of who God is and who we are in relation to God, especially as we see it grounded in the Old Testament.

Now, as I say that, you likely wonder what this has to do with Jesus' baptism. First of all, when we have this grounding of the Old Testament, we actually see this as a fulfillment. This birth, life, death, resurrection of Jesus is actually something that is the peak of all history. The world created by God as described in Genesis One, fallen into sin in Genesis 3, that world now has it's fulfillment as that Creator enters creation. And there's a very particular fulfillment in this baptism. Look at what happens. There Jesus comes to John, and He's getting ready to be submerged in those waters, and what happens? Look at what Matthew says. **"John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'"** So, John realizes who this is and tries to stop this from happening. He realizes Jesus is greater than him, and he says, "wait, this is backwards, you should be doing this to me." But what does Jesus say? **"Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."** There it is. This is a fulfillment. Things in the world, the Old Testament, they've been leading up to this.

In fact, you can see that when you look at the Old Testament. Did you know that in the Old Testament they had washings? It wasn't baptism, but they washed. If they touched something unclean, they washed. If they ate a food that was unclean, they washed. If they touched a dead person, they washed. If a woman had a baby, she washed. When she shed blood she washed. Why? This uncleanness, this impurity is a part of the world and needed cleansing. So Jesus gives the ultimate washing in baptism. But lest I get ahead of myself, first to His baptism.

How is this a fulfillment? Well, it fulfills these old washings, but think about this with John. What was John's baptism for? Do you all remember? He said it was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. So who needs forgiveness? Well, everyone, right? We know that. And why everyone? Because we're all sinners. Sinners need forgiveness. What does this mean, then, when Jesus subjects Himself to this baptism? Is He a sinner? No, certainly not. But it means He's standing with sinners. He's standing where sinners stand, He's identifying Himself with them. He's fulfilling what needs to be fulfilled for them. So that's first, this relates in that this baptism is fulfillment.

Second, we can understand this washing in view of water and the Old Testament. What do I mean by that? Well, think about the Old Testament and water. For example, look at the Old Testament reading for this morning. What happened when those Israelites walked in the water? And as I say that, let me give you some context. This is when the Israelites are entering the Promised Land. They were rescued by the Lord from their slavery in Egypt as they passed through the waters of the Red Sea—something Paul interestingly calls a baptism in his first letter to the Corinthians—but they were rescued, they lived in the wilderness for forty years with Moses, and now Joshua is taking them to the Promised Land. And what do we see in those waters? Listen: **“And when the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan.”** The Lord shall rest in the waters. There is God, with them in the waters.

Now if you know the Old Testament, you know this isn't unusual. God was there with the water at creation. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, and it was formless and void, and the Spirit of God hovered over the waters of the deep. There is the Spirit, there is God in the water at the beginning, and there is God in the water at the Jordan, and where do we see Him in Jesus' baptism? **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.”** There God is, actually the three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy

Spirit, there in the water. In the Old Testament, God is in the water—and to be clear that doesn't just mean any water, it's making a connection, but God and the water. Which brings us to the third part: comfort.

I was reading a book on pastoral care this week, a book about what it means to be a pastor, and I was reminded there of what I have so learned in my own ministry: the promise of God's presence and His work are the heart of His care. Where does God promise to be? Where does He promise to work? In His Word, in His body and blood, and as we look at God in those waters, we know: in baptism. That baptism of yours, there God was, for you. There the water tied to the word, Jesus was in the water, the Spirit brought Him to you in the water. It looked like just this ordinary sprinkling of water your head, but the God who created the whole universe, the Jesus who identified Himself with your sin, who was crucified for your sin, but raised for your forgiveness, the Spirit who gives life, they were there in that water.

Luther said it this way: *But no matter how external it may be, here stand God's Word and command which have been instituted, established, and confirmed in Baptism. What God instituted and commands cannot be useless. It is a most precious thing, even though to all appearances it may not be worth a straw.* Or as Paul said it: **“But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”** That water didn't look like much. It looked like water maybe washing dirt off your flesh, but it was more. Jesus was there, you were united to Him. You were buried with Him so that in dying you could rise again in His resurrection. You were cleansed by His Spirit there, purified, made new. All this through the water.

And that brings us to the last point with the Old Testament. Who created this world in the Old Testament? God, the true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, right? And what does He say about creation? It's good, isn't it? And since it's good—although it's fallen—He still uses it. He still promises that in that creation, in that water with the word—the word always doing the work there, without the word it's just water—but there He is working.

This is what we see with the Old Testament, we see that it grounds us in understanding who God is. It grounds us in the knowledge that He has made all things, that all things have fallen in our rebellion against Him, but that He has come to us in Jesus and fulfilled all things to save us. And now He does. He saves you, baptizes you. He makes you His own in those waters, so that you would know Him, He would be your God and you would live with Him eternally. Amen.