

BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

Matthew 3:13-17

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Today, Jesus is baptized. He is baptized, as we read, ***“to fulfill all righteousness,”*** to make you right with God. And heaven opens, a sign of the peace between God and man the Savior’s suffering and death will bring, a truth also signified in the tearing of the Temple curtain when He breathed His last. Today, Jesus accepts for all to see the task of sin-bearing, receiving a sinner’s Baptism. He did not need it. John makes that clear. In fact, John needed to be baptized by Jesus. But Jesus chose it. He chose to be baptized because He chose to be your Savior. He chose it from the fall into sin, and He left no doubt about it at His Baptism.

And the Father left no doubt. He spoke from heaven. He spoke especially for His Son, but also for us to hear. He spoke, ***“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”*** This was Jesus, God’s Son, sent to save, and He was fit for the task.

Through Baptism, you have been adopted as God’s sons and daughters, but could God speak the same of you today without blushing: ***This is my beloved son, my daughter, with whom I am well pleased?*** Christian experience teaches us that St. Paul’s frank confession in Romans 7 must also be our own:

21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 23 but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

This is the experience of the saints, because the Christian life is a struggle. We are baptized and born again saints, but we were first born sinners, and so Baptism throws us into a boxing ring, a battle between flesh and spirit, sinner and saint, all in the same person—a battle within ourselves and for ourselves, a struggle where the only surrendering must be to the mercy and benevolence of our Lord. Who will own us, God or the devil? How will we live, for our Savior from sin or in slavery to sin? If we won’t take the salvation of our souls seriously, after all, why should God?

St. Paul wrote to the Romans in chapter 8 of that letter:

12 So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. 13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”

You are not in debt to sin. You don’t owe it anything. There’s no reason for you to serve it. No, through the Spirit, and in the Spirit, and with the Spirit we will live, for all those led by the Spirit are sons of God, and in the midst of your struggle, as sin seeks again to claim you who have been set free from it, the Spirit prays with you and, yes, when you cannot form the words for prayer in weariness or confusion, the Spirit prays for you, ***“Abba, Father,”*** pleading nothing other than your Baptism, your adoption as God’s sons and daughters, as children of Christ born again in Him who on Christmas was born for us ***Immanuel.***

John was overwhelmed with a sense of unworthiness in Jesus' holy presence. The same John who boldly called out Pharisees and turned away the impenitent from the waters of repentance openly confessed that he did not deserve to unloose Christ's sandals, let alone baptize Him. He felt the same way I feel when with unclean hands I distribute the most pure Body and Blood of our Lord, when with unclean lips I proclaim the mercy of the spotless Lamb of God. John knew he didn't deserve to baptize Christ, but Jesus' Baptism, like all Baptism, was about grace, grace from Christ for us, and grace isn't a matter of deserving. In fact, it's quite the opposite. It's undeserved love.

Your Baptism is a gift from God, but like any gift it can be abused. If you start to think your Baptism is a get-out-of-jail-free card, the eternal prison awaits. If you have divorced faith from this gift, your unbelief will damn you. If you've taken God's mercy for granted and chosen a lifestyle contrary to His wisdom and will, you will learn the very wrath His mercy intended to spare you. In fact, you will be doubly guilty.

Remember St. Peter's words for those who dry off from their Baptism, who cease the struggle into which we've been baptized and surrender themselves again to the sin of which Baptism washed them, who plunge back into the darkness out of which Baptism led them into the light: ***"For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them."*** Those to whom much has been given have that much more to lose, and so unrepentant sin is nothing to wink and nod at, for if you persist in it and if you die in it, you will then stand before the Father whose adoption you rejected, the Son whose death and resurrection you turned your back on, the Spirit whose work you neglected and brought to naught. All we can say to those who've fallen into such a cold or indifferent attitude toward God's will is what the prophets so often said to Israel when it was poised for destruction, ***"Wake up!"***

But what comfort there is in this day for those of you who know your sins and long for forgiveness, who know the misery of sin and long for a way out, to be washed again, for those of you who feel sorrow for what you've done against God, who've lost track of His path but long to set your feet upon it again! Let me leave no doubt about it, Christ has fulfilled all righteousness for you. He walked the equivalent of a trip from downtown Merrill to downtown Saginaw for the expressed purpose of being baptized with your Baptism to give your Baptism power, lasting power, so that you can return to it, your adoption as God's children, again and again in repentance. He has freely taken your sins upon Himself. To you who confess your sins and desire to flee them, who seek God's mercy, I am privileged to speak the wonderful truth of God from 2 Corinthians 5. And it is truth of God for you, so take it as your own. ***"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."***

Heaven opens for Christ. Heaven opens for you in Christ. The Father speaks of Christ, ***"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."*** The Father speaks of you in Christ, ***"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."*** The Spirit descends to Christ as a dove, a symbol of peace. The Spirit descends to you in Christ, a dove, not only a symbol, but your actual peace of conscience and with God. We, like John, are unworthy. But John also leaves no doubt that worthy is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And He is our Lamb too. And through faith in Him and with His Spirit dwelling within us we can be in His Father's eyes what He calls us to be in our daily lives: ***"innocent as doves."*** Amen.