

Baptism of Our Lord + January 8, 2017
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
Matthew 3:13-12
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Why did Jesus need to be baptized?

For Christians, baptism is a sacrament and a central rite of the church. It signifies new life in Christ as we are liberated from sin and death. It marks the start of a life of discipleship as we conform to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We die to the old life as we go under the water and are born anew as we emerge. In this new life we repent and receive forgiveness, we love even our enemies, we suffer for the sake of the Gospel, and witness in our every action to the living Christ.

But none of these apply to Jesus. So why did he need to be baptized, and why did he need to be baptized by John?

John, as our Gospel reading tells us, had the same question. After Jesus made his intention known to John to be baptized, John actually tried to prevent it: “It is I who should be baptized by you, not the other way around,” he basically says. To John, baptizing Jesus might have not only seemed meaningless but possibly even blasphemous. Remember, John had been preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins—and for Jesus neither repentance nor forgiveness was an issue.

Yet, Jesus says the baptism must occur anyway, “to fulfill all righteousness.”

This gives us a clue. What righteousness? The righteousness of Jesus’ identity and his mission—righteousness meaning actions that are consistent with God’s will and God’s covenant with humankind.

First is the righteousness of his identity as God's Son. Going to the Jordan to be baptized by John is, according to the Gospels, Jesus' first action as an adult. Just before our Gospel reading Matthew suggests that a vast throng, the people of Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region along the Jordan were going out to John to be baptized, Like all those, Jesus receives John's call to baptism. Certainly the words and actions John used were the same as for the others. Jesus receives John's call to repent, confesses sin, and commits to God's will. But this is not the focus of the scene: What takes center stage is God's declaration of Jesus' identity: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Second is the righteousness of Jesus' identity in his mission. He is being baptized "to fulfill all righteousness." We remember well the word "fulfill" in Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, how God's plan was revealed especially to Joseph, to fulfill Old Testament prophecy, telling us that the circumstances of Jesus' life are in accord with God's will. Jesus' baptism expresses his commitment to live in God's will, which we know from Matthew 1 means being the agent of God's saving presence.

Jesus' baptism, then, signifies his commitment to act faithfully to his God-given commission to manifest God's saving presence, just as the angel announced to Joseph concerning Jesus' conception: "She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Jesus' commitment to enact God's saving purpose faithfully is the "fruit" that John calls for just before our Gospel reading today: "Bear fruit worthy of repentance," he says to the Jewish religious leaders who also come to the Jordan to be baptized. This is why John finally agrees to baptize Jesus.

Third, Jesus' baptism by John fulfills the righteousness of his identity in sending down the Holy Spirit. The climax of our scene today is not the baptism itself but the vision and audition, or sound, that Jesus encounters as he comes up from the water. When the heavens open, in Scripture,

it means that God is being revealed. Jesus alone sees the Spirit descending on him from heaven, the dwelling place of God. The Holy Spirit coming into him is God's response to his willingness to be baptized. This equips Jesus for ministry. It's important that God is speaking in the third person: "This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased." Because no one else on the scene heard this voice, the third person tells us that the message is really for us, God's people, the listeners and readers of the Gospel. In this way God declares *to us* Jesus' identity and destiny as God's agent.

And what is Jesus' role? To manifest God's presence, to reveal it on earth. With the Day of Epiphany on January 6, we are now in the Sundays after Epiphany, which continue until the Transfiguration on February 26.

The word "epiphany" comes from the Greek, "epiphaneia," meaning "appearing," "revealing," or "manifestation." During this brief season between Christmas and Lent, we leave mangers and swaddling clothes behind, and turn to stories of revelation. On the Day of Epiphany we would have heard about kings and stars. Today we hear of doves and voices. In the coming weeks we will come to know Jesus as the Lamb of God; as the one who calls his followers to fish for people; and as the one who, in the Sermon on the Mount, tells us about our own identity—as those who are blessed in life's most abject circumstances, as those who are the salt of the earth and light of the world, and as those who are called to love not only neighbors but enemies. On Transfiguration we then will behold him clothed in dazzling white, yet another sign of Jesus' true identity. Here God will repeat the affirmation of his Son—a fitting bookend to these Sundays of Epiphany--and adds an additional charge for us: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

No one has ever looked on the face of God, but in our Savior we have the very image of God before our eyes. In this time of Epiphany God is calling us to look, with Jesus, beneath and beyond the humdrum surfaces of our lives. Don't be satisfied with the ordinary; seek the extraordinary

wherever you can. The mind of Christ allows us to see the world as it really is, beyond the façade, into the depths of what people are experiencing in their lives. The heart of Christ allows us to minister to those who are suffering by simply being present and loving them through their pain. The ears of Christ allow us to listen without judgment, to listen as long as a person needs to talk. The hands of Christ make it possible for us to do the hard work of living that others are not willing to take on. The feet of Christ take us to places we would not otherwise go because we are apprehensive and afraid.

And the eyes of Christ invite us to see God's creation not as a series of objects against a grey background but as an exuberant interconnected ecosphere that is on fire with the dynamic dance of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As I was driving to Mt. Horeb Thursday morning on Rt. 59, a ray of sun broke through the dreary backdrop. Suddenly the entire landscape was transformed. The sheared cornfields as far as the eye could see were no longer brown and decrepit but became alive in shimmering gold. Perhaps you've had a fleeting experience of seeing the world charged with the grandeur of God. There is no better account of this than the poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins that I've pasted into the back page of your hymns and readings supplement.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

AMEN.