

The Baptism of Our Lord
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

MUST BE SOMETHING IN THE WATER
Matthew 3:13-17

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The church year, like the Bible itself, moves very quickly from Jesus' infancy to the beginning of His public ministry at about thirty years of age. The one lesson from Jesus' childhood years, the account of Jesus at aged twelve speaking with the rabbis in the temple, would ordinarily fall on this day, the Sunday after Epiphany, but this year because this festival day lands on a Sunday we will be moving right to Jesus baptism by John in the Jordan, the event that marks the beginning of Jesus' public work as rabbi, prophet, and Messiah.

It was to take up this work, after all, that He came down to become a man. And what is this great work but the salvation of the whole world. St. John explains in the part of his Gospel that nearly every Christian has memorized: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." The salvation of sinners is what the Son of God's incarnation and work are all about. He who is Himself holy and without sin, came down to save you, and every other person too, from your sins.

So it is very clear why Jesus came down from heaven. But why does He come down to the Jordan? Why does He start to publicly take up this task by coming to be baptized? Knowing what Baptism is, it just doesn't make sense. Baptism, after all, is a sacrament that imparts forgiveness of sins, that washes away shame and guilt, that gives the gift of the Holy Spirit, that imparts new life to a person, that makes sinners into God's own children and sons. But what Baptism removes, Jesus didn't have in the first place. He had no sin, either inherited from His father, for His Father is God the Father, or of His own. Neither had He any shame or guilt to be dealt with. He did not need to be saved from death or born again. And what Baptism gives, Jesus already had on His own. He is the only-begotten Son of the Heavenly Father. He has through all eternity had the Holy Spirit, who is One with Him and Father in Divine Essence and in love. He not only had spiritual life to the fullest, He is the source of all life, spiritual and physical.

And so it is confusing to see Jesus beginning His work at the Jordan. The prophet himself, John the Baptist, was also confused by this. He alone of the people present there that day recognized Jesus and knew Him for what He was. St. Mark writes: "John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins." But where John had preached repentance to others, he did not do so to Jesus. Where he proclaimed forgiveness of sins to others and offered it to them in baptism, he could not do so for Jesus. These others had sins to confess, John himself, being but a man, had his own sins too; but Jesus had none. And so, St. Matthew reports: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John tried to prevent Him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by You,

and are You coming to me?" Do not come down into this water, O Lord, for you do not need what it imparts. how can it bestow anything of blessing to you when it derives the blessing it gives from You by Your Holy Word and command? For John certainly knew as well or better even than Luther, that "without God's word the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit..." And now the Word of God incarnate was coming to him and asking to be baptized? It just didn't make any sense.

Nevertheless Jesus insists, saying to His cousin the prophet: "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." And at last, Matthew tells us, John permitted Him. And Jesus the Holy Son of God was baptized. He was not the first person that John had baptized. And He certainly would not be the last person to be baptized. Countless others have come to the waters of this Sacrament and many more will still be brought to it. But they, and that includes us too, are not like Him. All these enter the water in the filth of their sin. They foul the water with their guilt and their shame. They enter as dead things on account of their trespasses; and the water claims them in their death just as it claimed the dead in the days of Noah and just as it did with Pharaoh and his army at the Red Sea. But because God has attached His Word and promise to these waters, something miraculous happens. The dead emerge from the water alive; but not as they were, for now they have left behind all of their filthiness and the corruption of death. The water has washed it away, for this washing forgives sins and gives new life to those who were dead in sin.

When Jesus enters the waters, however, something entirely different happened. When you and I entered baptism, we entered filthy and came out clean. When Jesus came to the Jordan, He entered clean and came out covered with filth. It was as if the whole world had used the same bath water, had fouled it with all of the dirt and filth and garbage that each person brought with them, and then after everyone else has bathed, Jesus enters the foul and stinking soup of filth that remains. But not only does He get a little dirty in this bath. He takes all of it onto Himself, so that when He emerges the waters are clean. He takes on our sins and leaves behind His cleanliness.

He takes every impurity to Himself in order that having taken them away from you He can then take them to the cross and deal with them once and for all. For St. Paul tells us in Romans 6, and note here that He is talking about baptism: "Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with..." And again in Colossians 2, Paul writes: "buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross." Here is the reason for Jesus starting His public Messianic work in the Jordan. Here is the reason He insisted on being baptized, for in this blessed exchange, Jesus is doing His work of fulfilling all righteousness; that is, of taking on your sins that He may give you His righteousness. And this happens not just in the Jordan, but in all waters where God's Word and promise are applied and baptism takes place, even through the waters that sit in a big clay bowl at the entrance to a chapel.

And when Jesus emerges from the waters He is at once proclaimed by God the Father and the Holy Spirit; for Matthew tells us: “Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’” God is well-pleased because His Son is getting dirty? Well, that’s exactly what He sent Him to do! He sent Him down to take on Himself all sin and everything that comes with it: fear, shame, guilt, exile, pain, humiliation, death. He sent His Son to perish on the cross, so that we might not perish, but have everlasting life. He sent His Son to be judged, so that the world might not be judged but be saved. And so Christ’s baptism is pleasing to the Father. And later, when Jesus is near the completion of His saving work, just a few days before He is crucified, on the Mount of the Transfiguration the Father’s voice is heard again saying: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”



Through Him, and only through Him, do we also become pleasant and acceptable to God the Father. In Holy Baptism we are united with Christ and become sons of God through Him. In Baptism the Holy Trinity is revealed through the Word that is proclaimed “In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” and through the work that is done. There the love of God for the world and for each one of you in particular is proved and bestowed. And there fellowship with the Holy Trinity is first found, a fellowship that continues throughout the life of the faithful as they dwell in that grace, hear God’s Word and keep it, and feast with Him as His children. And all of it because of what Jesus through His baptism and through His death, and now through His Word imparts to the waters. All because through this washing, we receive the forgiveness of our sins. Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧