

"In This Together"

Mark 1:4-11

January 7, 2018

Epiphany 1 - The Baptism of Our Lord

Dear Friends in Christ,

He's John the Baptist, miracle child of Elizabeth and Zacharias' old age. He's all grown up now, and he stands out from the crowd. His wardrobe is strictly Old Testament prophet in style. You won't find camels' hair with leather accents on the runways of Paris or Milan in 30 A.D., and they may not be John's pick at all. But he's dressed that way for a reason: He's the new Elijah. He's dressed in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets because this is the office he holds: God has called him to prepare the way of the Lord, to point to the One who is mightier than he.

Strange place to be a prophet. There's no synagogue or amphitheater or marketplace in sight. He's in the wilderness, far enough away from town that the dinner menu is down to locusts and wild honey. Demographically, it doesn't make sense; it's much more reasonable for him to go into all of Judea with his message. But in the wilderness he stays, because that is where God has called him; he is to be the voice crying in the wilderness, and his station has been determined since the time of Isaiah. There he preaches, and all Judea goes out to hear his message.

Strange message. He preaches a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. It's not the most popular sermon ever offered. John bludgeons his hearers with the Law: He bellows at soldiers to act justly and commands tax collectors to work fairly. No respecter of persons, he blasts the Pharisees as a brood of vipers. This is not a feel-good homily, at least not so far; he warns them of their sinfulness and guilt before God. Of course, he doesn't stop with the Law. He is not there only to accuse them, to make them despair and leave them lost. He is preparing the way; so after a heavy dose of applicable Law, he turns to Gospel: One is coming after him, one who is far mightier and will baptize with the Holy Spirit. There's hope for you sinners, because He is coming. And with such a strange message, the people undergo a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

There must be times when John is tempted to abandon that strange message; it won't be much longer until he decreases and his ministry seems to nosedive. Eventually, his application of Law and Gospel to Herod will cost him his head. But the message is like the office and the wilderness: it's what God has given John to preach, and nothing else. If He abandons God's message, He is no longer God's messenger.

The time of John's decrease is close at hand, because on this day the preparation is complete; the way of the Lord is prepared. The Lord stands in the crowd on Jordan's banks that day. The incarnate second person of the Holy Trinity is standing among His people, and we note something strange again: Nobody notices that He's there. No one will know that the Savior is in their midst until John points Him out and says "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

No, when the Word made flesh stands among His people, He has no form or comeliness; and when they see Him, there is no beauty that they should desire Him. Furthermore, He makes no statement of authority that day; He does not seize the reigns and declare Himself to be the Mighty One. He comes

as Lamb, not lion; and rather than boast of His holiness and superiority before the multitudes, He comes to be baptized-just like all the poor, miserable sinners gathered to listen to John.

He comes to be baptized, and He is that day. John's protests don't even make it into Mark, because they are not the point. What matters is that Jesus has come to be baptized to fulfill all righteousness. And mark this well, dear brothers in Christ: He is baptized to fulfill all righteousness for you.

This Baptism of our Lord is an important stop on the way to the cross. It must be, because the Holy Trinity gathers at the banks of the Jordan, all three persons manifested. The Son is baptized. The Holy Spirit descends. The Father proclaims, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Just before the Temptation, the Trinity gathers at the banks of the Jordan, where Jesus is baptized like every sinner there. He is baptized for all nations, and He is baptized for you. We know that, in Holy Baptism, the sins of sinners are washed off of them by water and the Word. In Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan, the sins of all the world are washed onto Him. As we sang just a few minutes ago: Sinless, He sanctifies the wave; and He will drag that loathsome burden of sin with Him, never letting go-even when He must trudge up the hill of Calvary. On that way of sorrow, the wooden beams are shifted to Simon of Cyrene; but the far heavier cross still rests upon the shoulders of the Lord.

And that's your hope. By His Baptism, your Baptism is sanctified. As Father, Son and Holy Ghost were working for your salvation at the Jordan that day, so they worked your salvation at the font, when a pastor washed you with water and Word "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." So the Holy Trinity renews your Baptism with the words, "I forgive you all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." By this Absolution, you are prepared and renewed for the Lord's Supper, where you dine in the presence of God. All of this goes back to Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan River. If He is not baptized, your Baptism is not sanctified. If your sins are not washed onto Him there, they are not washed off of you at the font. If your sins are not washed away, you cannot stand the presence of God.

But Jesus is baptized. He is present in Word and Sacrament for your good. So you have hope.

II. What This Means for You

What does this mean for you? This is why you treasure your baptism so highly. This is about your salvation. It's also about your life as a Christian.

First, remember Jesus' baptism. It was for you, too. Jesus said, "I'll be the Sinner who's judged instead of you," and so He was baptized to bear all of your sins to the cross, and to suffer in your place. He's done so for all people, so that He might give forgiveness, faith and salvation to all who believe.

How do you know that He's given forgiveness, faith and salvation to you? That's where your baptism comes in. Hear again a few verses from our epistle, Romans 6:3-4: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

When you were baptized, Jesus joined you to His death and resurrection. He tells you that you've already died to sin, because He died for your sin on the cross and gives you the credit for it. He tells

you that you've already been raised with Him, because He gives you life. Your body must still face death, but you already have eternal life. At your baptism, Jesus joined you to Himself. He added you—the branch—to Him, the Vine. He adopted you as His own and said, "You're in My family now. We're in this together. As long as you have Me, your sins are gone and you're holy before God."

Jesus has joined you to Him. You're in this together with Him. It's no coincidence that when Jesus commanded baptism in Matthew 28, He also promised, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." You can be sure that forgiveness and salvation are yours because Jesus gave them to you in your baptism, and He continues to give them to you in His Word and Supper.

That's common knowledge among us, I hope. It defines what it means to live as a Christian. To live as a Christian is to live in your baptism. To live in your baptism is to be in this together with Christ. It's to live a life of ongoing repentance and confession: that doesn't sound glamorous, but it's important. See, Jesus remains the holy Son of God, risen from the dead: He cannot abide with sin. If you do not live a life of repentance, but instead hold onto sin or just don't care about being forgiven, then you're saying to Jesus, "I'd like you to step away for a bit. I don't want to be in this together with You." That leads to hard hearts and unbelief.

That's why you live in your baptism with a life of repentance. You constantly affirm the truth and confess your sins, that you need Jesus and His grace. It's also why you make it a point to hear the Word, because the Word made flesh comes to you there. It's why you avail yourself of the Supper often, because you can't be in this together much more than when Jesus gives you His body and blood. It's why, if you're especially troubled by some sin, you even make use of private confession and absolution so that you might hear from your Savior in His Word that not even that sin can separate you from Him.

The Christian life is all about remaining in Christ, for Christ declares that He is in this together with you.

If that seems dull to you, please understand how terribly important it is to make this plain. Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ get this wrong. In many churches, it's taught that baptism is a historical event in the past—a starting point at best, and now the Christian life is all about you making yourself better, you conquering bad habits, you overcoming your sin because of what Jesus has done for you in the past. The message seems to be, "Jesus came before the past and He is coming again in the future: the Christian life is all about you preparing yourself for when you're with Him." How pervasive is this teaching in our land? Go to a Christian bookstore, and see how many shelves are filled with Christians "self-help" books—and then go and see how many shelves are devoted to Jesus with you in the means of grace. This is one of the reasons why we have such a difficult time seeing the Christian life as remaining with Christ, because it's so often portrayed as trying to get to Him.

No, living as a Christian is to live with Christ now. To live with Christ is to be with Jesus where He comes to you, so that He might be in this together with you all the days of your life. By His grace and presence, He strengthens your faith—so God grant you victory over temptation and sin by His grace. But where you fall and still struggle with sin, know that Christ is in this together with you, for He's joined you to Himself in your baptism. You remain His beloved child, in whom He is well pleased—not because you've made yourself better, but because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen