

The Next Step
 Matthew 3:16
 January 12, 2020

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 3:16: "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.'" This is our text.

I. The Baptism of Jesus

The next step is into the water.

God's plan for your salvation, first decreed in Genesis 3, has reached a milestone with the incarnation of His Son. Jesus becomes flesh, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He's grown up, holy and sinless, preparing for the next step—His public ministry. In our Gospel lesson for today, that public ministry begins with a huge statement and the next step into the water.

Jesus is baptized in our Gospel lesson, which just doesn't seem right. John the Baptist even tries to stop Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" It's no great mystery why John the Baptist tries to prevent Jesus from being baptized. He's been baptizing sinners with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He's been washing tax collectors, prostitutes and other notorious sinners who've led scandalous lives and are in need of redemption. So here comes Jesus, the holy Son of God—no sin, no shame, no scandal. Imagine a completely healthy, cancer-free adult going to a hospital and asking for some serious radiation treatment: the doctors would refuse, because he doesn't need it. It would do him no good, only harm. John looks to bar Jesus from his baptism for the same reason: Jesus doesn't need it because He's sinless and needs neither repentance nor forgiveness. It won't do Him any good: if anything, it will harm His reputation. There are some people you want to be seen with in life, and other people whose presence would hurt your standing. If Jesus steps into the river to be baptized, He's identifying Himself with all of those dirty, lowdown loser sinners who are doing the same. He's the eternal Judge of these people on the Last Day, and He's stepping in to get splashed with all their iniquity and dirt.

To which Jesus says, exactly. Actually, He says, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting to fulfill all righteousness." He doesn't just tell John to let it go, but commands John to permit it. He has come to be baptized just like all of those unholy, shameful people around Him. This isn't just a gesture: Jesus says He is baptized to fulfill all righteousness.

And how, pray tell, does His getting baptized with all of those sinners fulfill all righteousness?

This is how: He's taking their place. He's not just saying that He's a friend of sinners or on their side. By His baptism, He's becoming the Sinner. We'd better be clear: He remains the holy, sinless Son of God. But remember how He comes to save us from our sin: He becomes flesh to go to the cross in our place. On the cross, God will judge Him, condemn Him for our sins. During the crucifixion, the Father will literally give His Son hell in our place.

Ever see the movie "Spartacus," with Kirk Douglas? The iconic scene is when the Roman soldiers have captured the rebels and announced they will be spared crucifixion if they only identify their leader, Spartacus. When Spartacus is about to identify himself, every other man stands up and shouts, "I'm Spartacus!" The many are ready to take the punishment for the one.

At Jesus' baptism, the opposite happens. According to His holy Law, God declares, "I must judge and condemn the sinner." By His baptism, Jesus declares, "Here I am! I'm the Sinner! Judge Me!" There, at the Jordan, the One declares Himself ready to take the punishment for the many. For all. For you.

That is His—and His Father's—plan for your salvation. To fulfill that plan, that Word of God, that righteousness, Jesus steps into the water to be baptized. If He isn't baptized and doesn't go to the cross, all righteousness is not fulfilled.

Although His baptism marks Him as the One to be judged on the cross, His Father doesn't forsake Him at the Jordan. Quite the contrary! When Jesus is baptized, the heavens are opened to Him. The Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove and comes to rest on Him. And God the Father declares from heaven, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

That, my friends, is worthy of some extended meditation: behold the nature of God, that He is love and by nature a servant. The Father has required a sacrifice for sin. The Son identifies Himself as the Sacrifice for sin. At the cross, the Son will be forsaken by the Father as the Father condemns the Son. All of this is in motion when Jesus is baptized: yet Jesus stays the course in perfect obedience to His Father; and when the Son identifies Himself as the Sinner to be judged, the Father says that He is well pleased with His beloved Son. Why? Because they are working together in service to you. In love, They sacrifice whatever They must for your salvation.

Do you see? It is not that you make sacrifices to please God, but that God sacrifices Himself to save you!

II. Heaven Opened

One time, when Luther preached on this text, he focused on the phrase that the heavens were opened to Jesus—and he noted that the Scriptures never say that the heavens closed up again. They remained open after Jesus' baptism. Even better, they remain open for you because of it.

Your baptism is connected to Jesus' baptism. Our epistle from Romans 6 tells you why: "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."

It's in your baptism that Jesus has joined you to His death and resurrection. It's there that He says, "I was born in Bethlehem for you—to be Your Savior, to win salvation; and your baptism is where I have given that salvation to you."

It's by that water and Word that Jesus says, "Remember how I became the Sinner for you when I was baptized. At your baptism, your sins were washed off of you. At My baptism in the Jordan that you hear about in this Gospel lesson, all of your sins were washed onto Me."

It's at the font that Jesus says, "I've already died your death for sin on the cross, and in baptism I join you to that death. I share it with you, so that you don't have to die for your sin."

And it's at the font that Jesus says, "I also rose again! And if I've joined you to My death, I've also joined you to My resurrection. You walk in newness of life, life that will never end."

All of that connects your baptism to His baptism: Christ, who made your sin to be His own and died with it now makes you His own that you might live forever.

There's even more: remember Jesus words when He instituted baptism. He commanded His apostles to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." So when you were baptized, that's exactly what the pastor was to say: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Here's another connection between you and Jesus, your baptism and His. When He was baptized, remember: the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove, and God the Father spoke from heaven and said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." The triune God was present at the Jordan for your salvation.

The triune God was present at your baptism, too. As we mentioned from Luther before, the heavens that opened at Jesus' baptism haven't shut yet. Heaven is not closed to you—it is open for the sake of Jesus. So when you were baptized in the Name of the triune God, the triune God was there—for the Lord is present where His Name is invoked. When you were baptized, the Son was there to join you to His death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit descended upon you to give you forgiveness and faith and salvation. And for the sake of Jesus, the Father declared to you, "You are My beloved son. You are my beloved daughter. You are not My only-begotten Son from eternity; but for His sake, You are now My beloved sons and daughters—heirs of heaven—and I am well pleased with you!"

It's truly Good News: at His baptism, Jesus became the Sinner so that you might become His child.

This is huge for your life as a Christian. The devil seizes on those things that trouble your conscience and says, "Look at those sins—there's no way you can be a holy child of God, you sinner." But you remember the baptism of Jesus—and that by His baptism He says, "No! I'm the Sinner. I'm the One who is to suffer God's judgment, not you." And you know this to be true for you because He's said through the mouth of a preacher, "I baptized you."

The world comes along and roughs you up with scorn or trouble or affliction and then relentlessly mocks you: "Ha. What sort of benefit is there to being a child of God? Your faith is in vain." But you see Jesus in the Jordan, having come into this world for your salvation. You see Him take up the burden not just of your sin, but also your infirmities and afflictions. He goes to the cross and dies—and then He rises again victorious. So you know that the world is a liar like the devil, too: even as Christ suffered afflictions in this world, so will you. But your faith is not in vain: He joined you to His death and His resurrection in your baptism. He will not forsake you in this world. Even better, He will raise you up from it to everlasting life in heaven.

And of course, death continues to stalk you like the bully it is. It's an enormous foe who wins again and again, dragging everyone into the tomb and giving no ground. Well, almost everyone: It couldn't hold onto Christ, and Christ only submitted to death and grave in order to break its grip and rise again. In Christ, you see that death can be beaten. But it gets better than that! The One who conquered death did it for you! He died your death for you and rose again. He's joined you to His death and resurrection—where? In baptism!

Do you see what great gifts God has given you there? He's made you His holy child, because Jesus became the Sinner in your place. He promises that He will not forsake you in death, because Jesus has joined you to His death and risen again. He promises to deliver you from every affliction in His time, because He's joined you to His resurrection and given you newness of life. And all along the way, heaven remains open. Christ keeps giving forgiveness. The Holy Spirit keeps giving faith. And the Father continues to assure you for Jesus' sake, "You are My beloved child. I am well pleased with you."

Your baptism is not just an event in the past. It is a present comfort. It is okay to say, "I was baptized," but it is far more comforting to say, "I am baptized." Because you are baptized, you are certain of God's favor and protection, all for the sake of Jesus.

You know that He has delivered you from your sins, from Satan, and even from death, because in your Baptism He's joined you to His death and resurrection. And now you know that God is well pleased with you for Jesus' sake, 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