

Luke 3:15-22

Epiphany 1 + The Baptism of Our Lord + January 13, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The Word of the Lord from Luke 3:21-22: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Imagine you are the parent of a young child, the sort of child who likes French fries and play structures; and on some dreary January day, you take him to a fast food restaurant with an indoor playground. He wolfs down some chicken nuggets and fries, finishes his soft drink and – being a polite, obedient child – asks if he can go play on the playground. You grant permission and watch him bolt for the structure while you throw napkins and cups away.

You arrive twenty seconds after your child has eagerly crawled into a tunnel and ... you're horrified. You see two kids bullying a third. You hear crying, screams of pain and fear inside the tubes, and other children using bad words that make grown-ups blush. In between the vulgarities, you hear sneezing and coughing; and then, there's the awful sound of someone violently sick to their stomach. A parent next to you sighs and says, "That sounds like mine again. He hasn't been able to keep anything down for a week and counting."

Your child is in there somewhere, and what are you compelled to do? Get him out of there as fast as possible. You don't want him being bullied and you don't want him to learn to bully. You don't want him learning and repeating *those* words. You certainly don't want him to catch a cold or whatever stomach virus has been around for a week and counting. No offense intended to your fellow human beings, but get your child out of there!

The Jordan River is far from clean in our gospel lesson: it's full of sinners. They've come from all over to hear John the Baptist preach and prepare the way. For those who repent, he calls them to be baptized; and so one after another, sinners join John in the river to be baptized. It's not just the sweat of their bodies and the dust of the road that gets washed off of them that day, but all of their sins: their evil thoughts and vulgar words, their acts of theft and immorality, bad habits and gossip and lies, pride and lovelessness and more, all washed away. Imagine, if you will, that all this iniquity is a sluggish cloud that sits in the pool where John stands, reluctant to move downstream.

Then Jesus is standing there, God's only-begotten Son. John has been preparing the way of the Lord, with words like these: "His winnowing fork is in His hand, to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire." The holy, sinless Judge has arrived on the scene to find a crowd of sinners who pollute themselves and all creation with their sin, but on this day there is no winnowing fork in His hand. Nor are there any thunderbolts of judgment, no whiff of fire and brimstone in the breeze. He doesn't start knocking heads together or braid a whip out of few cords. He doesn't even glare at them for the disappointments that they are, nor does He start preaching about how much they've let Him down.

Nope. What does He do instead? He gets in the water with them. He wades right in and tells John to baptize Him too. We know from Matthew that John isn't keen on the idea and tries to prevent it: this baptism is for sinners, and he knows that Jesus is the holy Son of God. I mean, consider the optics: if Jesus gets baptized like all of these sinners, what's that going to look like? It's going to look like Jesus is one of them.

But what you see is not quite right. It's worse. And it's better.

When Jesus is baptized, He takes His place among sinners because He's taking the place of sinners. Remember that cloudy mess of sins washed off and sluggishly adrift in the pool of the river? It doesn't filter downstream: when Jesus is baptized, no sins are washed off of Him because He has no sin; but imagine all those sins of others are washed onto Him.

This is far worse than your kid picking up somebody's horrendous stomach virus at a playground. This is willfully, intentionally contracting sin and all of its consequences – as far as self-preservation goes, this is worse than wandering through a ward of Ebola patients and kissing each one on the lips. What is Jesus doing? Instead of a winnowing fork and some long overdue no-nonsense law-and-order, Jesus goes and gets baptized and takes His place among sinners just like He's one of them.

Is this His version of overdue teenage rebellion – is He poking His Father in the eye and saying, "I'm just going to slum with these people for a while?" We don't have to wonder, because the Father leaves us no doubt as to what He thinks of this development: in a loud voice from heaven, God the Father declares, "You are My beloved Son, with You I am well pleased."

Not "You are My beloved Son, but I just don't understand You sometimes." Not, "You are My beloved Son, but I disagree with Your choices." The Father declares that He's well pleased that His Son has done this thing, because it's all part of the plan that Jesus take the place of sinners. He's going to carry all that sin and all of sin's consequences to the cross; and there, He will suffer God's judgment for sinners, so that they might be delivered.

The Father approves of His Son's baptism! This really shouldn't surprise us, because this isn't your ordinary Father and Son: these are two persons of the Holy Trinity. There is never a time when they're not going to agree. There is never a time when they don't desire your salvation.

Speaking of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is there too. The heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove. This fulfills prophecy, like this from Isaiah 42:1-4:

Behold My Servant, whom I uphold, My Chosen, in whom My soul delights; I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up His voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed He will not break, and a faintly burning wick He will not quench; He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till He has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for His law.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all in on the plan. All approve! Before the winnowing fork of judgment, the Son first comes meekly and humbly, for bruised reeds and faintly-burning wicks. For them, He shoulders the burden of sin and hauls it to Calvary.

Don't forget that the heavens open, too: it's not so that God's voice is less muffled or because the Holy Spirit needs a way to get down to Jesus. No, the heavens are opened – and they never close – because your redemption is as good as done. As soon as Jesus starts taking up sin, He's headed to the cross – there's no other destination. He'll spend three years on the way. He'll forgive many and add their sins to His load. He will heal many of diseases and, according to Matthew, He adds those infirmities to His burden and hauls them to the cross too. The baptism of Jesus is His death sentence so that you might have life.

And yet, God the Father says, "You are My beloved Son, with You I am well pleased." How greatly He must love you.

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We've had a delightful run of baptisms here as of late, and as part of the liturgy for baptism we have prayed, "Almighty and eternal God, ... through the Baptism in the Jordan of Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, You sanctified and instituted all waters to be a blessed flood and a lavish washing away of sin." Jesus' baptism is connected to your baptism, and we might picture it this way: when you were baptized, all of your sins were washed off of you; and when Jesus was baptized, all of your sins were washed onto Him.

If this offends your respect for the laws of time, remember that you already believe that Jesus bore your sins to the cross and died for them almost 2000 years before you were around to sin, so it's not a huge stretch to think of Him carrying those sins for three more years before His death.

This is the good news of Romans 6, our epistle.

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. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.

That little washing of water and the Word does great things, because the same Father, Son and Holy Spirit at the Jordan that day are at work at the font for you. In baptism, Jesus shares His death with you. He gives you the credit for it. On the cross, He suffered the judgment, the condemnation, the fiery hell of God's wrath in your place, and then He shares the benefit with you in baptism. All of His suffering for sin feels to you like a splash of water, because in baptism you die with Christ to sin.

It gets even better, because Jesus rose again on the third day; and in baptism He shares His resurrection with you. He didn't stay dead, so you can't either. He rose from the dead, and He'll raise you from the dead. It's already given: you already walk in newness of life. The death of your body is not the start of eternal death, because in Christ you already have eternal life. Death is now a conquered enemy under Jesus' feet; and He uses it to deliver you from this corrupted body and raise you up, incorruptible and never to die again.

All this is given to you in your baptism. It's why Luther says that it's perfectly true to say, "I *was* baptized," but far better to say, "I *am* baptized." After all, it's not wrong to say, "I was alive last year;" but it's far better – and reassuring – to say, "I am alive now!"

That's a lot of joy, but here's the problem: chances are excellent that you do not value your baptism near as much as you should.

Consider, after all, why Romans 6 begins with this question: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" Why would Paul suggest such a ridiculous thing? Because that's how every Christian is tempted to live. Your old sinful nature keeps on saying, "You know, if Jesus has already paid the price for your sins, you've got quite the line of credit, so why not indulge?" It's a seductive temptation, so much so that you're tempted to think that the Christian life is about seeing how much you can get away with before God gets mad at you.

This is as smart as saying, "I wonder how much arsenic I can get away with drinking before I suffer some bad health effects." Actually, there are two differences: one is that I don't think there are a lot of people who think that adding arsenic to your diet is a good thing. The other thing is that arsenic only kills off the body. Sin kills body and soul. If you've been born again by water and the Spirit, why would you want to die again?

Are you to continue to sin that grace may abound? May it never be! You're baptized! You've died to sin. You have eternal life. You're joined to Christ and clothed in His righteousness. Cheapening that and keeping your pet sins around is the way to take the cross for granted; do that, and gradually those sins will build like coral into unbelief. You may even reject the Lord's gifts and make yourself a lost slave to sin again without even realizing it.

The Christian life is much, much better than that. Why don't you continue in sin? Because you live by faith. You know that sin corrupts and harms and isolates and kills, and you know that Christ has died and risen to set you free from all that. How do you know that He's died and risen *for you*? Romans 6 says you know it because you're baptized.

Why do you live, not to sin, but to do good works? You do them out of thankfulness and joy. You're not sweating that you have to get enough good done so that the Lord will overlook your sins on Judgment Day. The Lord has already given you His death, His resurrection and newness of life. If someone gives you a spectacular gift, do you not feel grateful? With all that Christ has given you, why would your life not be one of thankfulness to Him? And how do you know that Christ has given you such spectacular gifts? According to Romans 6, you know because you're baptized.

When you *do* sin, when your conscience is troubled by what you have done and you're tempted to believe that *that* sin is unforgiveable, you know that Jesus carried all of your sins to the cross, died for all of them. He didn't say, "I forgive everybody but you." In fact, you know that He has died for all of your sins, died and risen for you. Why? Romans 6 says you know because you're baptized.

When you do sin and your conscience doesn't trouble you, well, have a glass of arsenic. No, wait! Repent! You know by faith that the sin is sin, even if it doesn't trouble you. You confess the sin, you also confess the fact that you're untroubled by it, and you trust you are forgiven. How do you know that the Lord still hears your prayers? Romans 6: you're baptized.

And when death plunks its ugly self down square in front of you and says, "It's only a matter of time, because I always win," you say, "No, you don't. You lost on Calvary: I mean, it looked like you had Jesus, in the tomb and everything; but then He rose from the dead. He beat you. Furthermore, death, He's shared that victory with me, made me His own. If you're going to keep me, you've got to re-conquer Jesus; and I believe Romans 6 says He will never die again. If you can't get Him, you can't keep me, either, because He's promised to raise me from the dead." How do you know that all of this is true for you? Romans 6: you're baptized.

When everything in your life argues that there is no hope, by faith you say, "I know that Jesus died for me, because He died for all; and I know that He gave that grace and life to me, because He did so when I was baptized."

What joy! In baptism, you're born again. For the sake of Jesus, who was baptized to take His place among sinners, God now looks upon you and says, "You have a place with Me. You are My beloved child – with you I am well pleased." How silly it would be to throw that all away, and how tragic that so many do. That's why you daily repent and say, "These sins are not who I am anymore, because death and hell are not for me."

How do you know? Because you're baptized. Because Christ has taken your sins, washed you clean, made you God's beloved child and an heir of His kingdom. Which is to say, "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