

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Baptism of Our Lord – January 6th and 9th, 2011

Text: Matthew 13:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

Dear children of our Heavenly Father,

If you could ask Jesus absolutely anything, what would you want to know? If the all-seeing, all-knowing Son of God was standing in front of you ready and willing to give you the answer to any question, what would it be?

Maybe you would want to find out something about your future. When will I die? How will I die? Will I die? If not, Jesus, when are you coming back? And when you do, what will life be like in heaven? Or maybe you would want the answer to some secret from the ancient past. Did the earth always look the same as it does today? What was the world's first spoken language? What happened to the dinosaurs? Or maybe you would ask Jesus to shed some light on a mystery from Bible history. What was the original location of the Garden of Eden? Who was Melchizedek? Whatever happened to the Ark of the Covenant?

The text for this morning presents us with another Biblical question, a question that has puzzled theologians for centuries. After thirty years of living in relative obscurity, after three decades confined to the area in and around the Galilean city of Nazareth, Jesus decided that it was time to leave. And so he packed up and headed for the region of the Jordan.

The question is: “Why?” Why did Jesus seek out John the Baptist? Why did Jesus want to be baptized by him? Why here? Why now? Jesus isn't here to answer all of our questions this morning, but he has given us his Word. And the inspired words of Matthew will provide us with everything we need to get to the bottom of this important question...

Theme: Jesus, Why Did You Go Down to Be Baptized?

- 1. It was part of his Father's plan**
- 2. He was anointed by the Holy Spirit**

If you have ever asked yourself why Jesus wanted to be baptized in the first place, you aren't the only one. When Jesus approached John with the initial request, he was surprised. He was surprised because he preached a baptism of repentance. And as far as John knew, Jesus didn't need to repent.

Perhaps an illustration will help us understand John's predicament. How would you feel if Kobe Bryant came up to you and asked for some tips on shooting the basketball? How would you feel if Bill Gates asked for your advice about computers? How would you feel if Aaron Rodgers sought you out for a lesson on being a quarterback? You get the idea.

The way John saw it, he wasn't at all qualified to do what Jesus was asking him to do. That is why he was reluctant. That is why he tried to change Jesus' mind. That is why he said: **“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”** But Jesus was on a divine mission, and nothing and no one was going to stand in his way. He replied: **“Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all**

righteousness". Notice that Jesus didn't say: "John, you've got it all wrong" because in a sense John was right. Of the two men who stood face-to-face on the banks of the Jordan, he was the sinner. He was the one who needed to repent. He was the one in need of God's forgiveness. And that is exactly what Jesus came to bring.

The challenge for us is to understand Jesus' baptism in the light of Jesus' words. Some will say that Jesus wanted to be baptized because it was his Father's will. This is true, but there's more. Others will say that Jesus wanted to be baptized to give us a good example to follow. Again this is true, but there's more. Jesus didn't need to be baptized in the same way we do, but it was the proper thing to do and it was the proper time to do it to **"fulfill all righteousness."** We should never forget that the Son of God had been fulfilling the righteous demands of the law since the day he was born. For thirty years he had been perfectly obedient to his parents and superiors. For thirty years he had done everything God's law required.

But Jesus' life was about to change. The events of this day thrust Jesus into the public eye. Over the course of the next three years some hailed him as the Lord. Others called him a liar. Still others dismissed him as a lunatic. His enemies attacked him, arrested him and eventually executed him even though he had done nothing wrong. And the amazing thing is that Jesus let it all happen. The sinless Son of God willingly obeyed his Father to **"to fulfill all righteousness."** And it all started on the banks of the Jordan River when Jesus was baptized by John.

But before we talk any more about that blessed event, there is one matter that needs to be cleared up. If Jesus came to earth to **"fulfill all righteousness,"** the implication is that there are others who have left God's righteous demands unfilled. So who is guilty? Who is to blame? We might not want to hear the answer: **"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Romans 3:10-12).** No one is righteous. No one is blameless. That means we deserve to die. That means we are the ones who forced Jesus to leave his Father's side. That means our sins nailed him to the cross. That means we are in desperate need of the saving waters of baptism. And that is precisely what makes the baptism of Jesus so meaningful for us.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (II Corinthians 5:21). By his baptism a sinless God identified himself with sinful people. Jesus wasn't baptized for his own sins because he didn't have any. He was born and baptized and lived and died and rose again so that we might be declared righteous in the eyes of God, so that we might have the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. And the Lord showers all those blessings on us in the sacrament of Holy Baptism.

The apostle Peter connects this idea with baptism when he says: **"In it (the ark) only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also" (I Peter 3:20, 21).** We also have the Baptismal Font in front of Church. Why is the font so important? What makes the font so important? The font is where the water and the Word come together. The font is where the Holy Spirit does his soul saving work. The font is where the water of baptism washes sin away.

We also have the picture of the dove. The dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit. And the dove brings us all the way back to the baptism of Jesus. **"As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him"**. This was an important moment. This was an important moment for John the Baptist because the dove's descent was a sign. It was God's way of telling John who Jesus was and what he had come to do (see John 1:32,33).

But as significant as this moment was for John, it held even greater significance for the one who had been baptized. As Jesus prepared to embark on his public ministry, as he looked ahead at the difficult path that lay before him, it was encouraging for him to know that he was not alone. God was with him, and God's Spirit rested on him.

But the Spirit didn't descend only to encourage Jesus. He also came down to equip him. Jesus knew that when he went up out of the water. Jesus knew that when unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and proclaimed: **“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4:18,19).** Jesus understood that when he rolled up the scroll and declared: **“Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).**

The Holy Spirit anointed Jesus at the very beginning of his public ministry. He gave him everything he needed to preach and teach, to raise up and tear down, to build and to plant. And as Jesus set out to carry out his divine mission, there was no doubt that he had his Father's approval: **“And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased’”.**

Most children want to make their parents proud, and so Jesus was probably very happy to hear that his heavenly Father was pleased with him. The words, “This is my Son,” reminded Jesus that he enjoyed an intimate relationship with his heavenly Father. But perhaps the most meaningful words can be found right in the middle. God said, **“This is my Son, WHOM I LOVE.”**

God loved Jesus. God loved Jesus more than any human parent could ever love a child because God is love. But if God loved Jesus so much, then why did he send him to his death? Why did a loving Father sacrifice his one and only Son? Because God also loves us. Because God so loved the world. Because **“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (I John 4:10).**

“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased”. This is a message that bears repeating. This is a message that God did repeat on the Mount of Transfiguration (see Matthew 17:5). This is a message that God's Son carried to its final conclusion on Mount Calvary. There Jesus demonstrated his unwavering love for his Father by obeying his will. There Jesus demonstrated his undying love for sinners by dying on the cross.

Inquisitive minds will always have questions. Some of our questions won't be answered on this side of eternity. But Jesus Christ has already provided us with the answer to life's most important question: Where will I spend eternity? Because of the Father's love, because of the Son's obedience, because of his sinless life and innocent death and triumphant resurrection, because the Holy Spirit has worked faith in our hearts, we know the answer. Because of the saving activity of our triune God, we will live with him forever in heaven. Amen.