

"This Is My Beloved Son"

Matthew 3:13-17

January 12, 2014

The Baptism of Our Lord

Baptisms are special events where special things happen. There are special people present for the event. Friends and family from all over will gather at the church. There are special items prepared for this event: baptismal gowns, baptismal candles, and baptismal certificates. Then, there is the event which is pretty special in and of itself. The pastor gathers with the family, sponsors, and the person to be baptized up front and in the middle at the baptismal font with the big paschal candle there for the actual baptism.

As special and memorable as any baptism might be, there is no baptism that was ever quite as special and memorable as Jesus' baptism which we commemorate today on the 1st Sunday after the Epiphany. In our Gospel ready for today, we read what happened. After Jesus was baptized, He came up out of the water and things started happening. The heavens were opened up. The Holy Spirit descended like a dove and came upon Jesus. A voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Wow! Pretty impressive! Those kinds of things don't normally happen at baptisms here or anywhere else, I imagine. We probably think that this is because Jesus is the Son of God and we are anything but sons and daughters of God because of our sin. Jesus is in full communion with God while we are separated from God. Isaiah, the prophet, wrote, "your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear."

(Is. 59:2)

Despite this assessment of Scripture, we'd still like to think we are all God's children and not really bad people. Paul has a bleaker view of the situation. We are not, by nature, children of God, but something else. Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus, "We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like

the rest of mankind.” (Ephesians 5:3) Being separated from God by sin and children of wrath, we are destined for nothing better than hell.

Jesus came to change that. He is the Servant of the Lord prophesied by Isaiah in our Old Testament lesson today: “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.” (Isaiah 42:1) Israel had failed as “sons of God” and servants of the Lord. Their sins had separated them from God and they were destined for the Lord’s wrath. The Messiah would come to take the place of Israel, be anointed with the Holy Spirit, and “bring forth justice to the nations.” He would do everything necessary to make things right between God and His people and between God and all creation.

Today is such an important day, not only in our church calendar, but in our lives because Jesus’ ministry to fulfill that prophecy and complete that task began at His baptism. “In this new, end-time exodus of salvation that God is now inaugurating as his reign is breaking into history, Jesus has come as God’s Son, the representative of the nation, to be in the people’s place. The One who has come to be baptized in the place of sinners does so as God’s sinless Son by right, to save [his sons] lost in sin.” (Gibbs, p.184) In His ministry, Jesus would do all that Israel and all that we should have done. Jesus would receive all that Israel and all that we deserved for what we did do.

The Father is well-pleased with His Son’s humble baptism in the place of sinners. But this is only a start. “The Father will also be well-pleased with his Son’s lowly suffering and death in the place of sinners. The Father will reveal his pleasure in his Son, [not in a miraculous voice, booming from heaven, but] by raising him from the dead.” (Gibbs, p.184)

By His baptism for us, by His perfect life for us, by His complete sacrifice on the cross for us, and by His victory over death and the tomb for us, Jesus has sanctified baptism and empowered its waters to do for us what it had done for Him, but in reverse order.

Although not as in such a dramatic fashion as Jesus’ baptism, God the Father does say to each of us, “This is my beloved son, beloved daughter, with whom I am well pleased.” The waters of

our baptism have washed away our sin and, thus, have done away with the separation they had caused. But it is more than that. Baptism does more than change our situation. Baptism changes our identity. Paul writes to the Galatians, “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (Gal. 3:26-27) As our epistle reading says, baptism put us in Christ – His death, burial and resurrection. When we are “in Christ”, we are, by God’s designation, who Christ is by nature: the son of God, the daughter of God.

As the Father was well-pleased with His Son at His baptism, so He is now well-pleased with His present day sons and daughters at our baptisms. This disposition which the Father has toward us is not of our doing. There is nothing we could ever do to make Him pleased with us. There is nothing we would ever have to do to make Him pleased with us. The Father is well-pleased with us already because of what Christ had to do, could do, and was willing to do in His perfect life in place of our sinful life and His sacrifice on the cross for our sins. You and I are free from the uncertainty caused by trying to please God with our good efforts. We are free from the guilt of our failed efforts to please God. We are simply free to live in our vocations as sons and daughters of God where our efforts are pleasing to God through Christ.

It’s easy to say that, but a challenge to do that – a challenge which God empowers us to meet. Although not in the dramatic form of a dove, the Holy Spirit nevertheless descended and came to rest on us in our baptism. That’s not speculation or a doctrine concocted by the Church. That is a promise of God. In his sermon on Pentecost, the apostle Peter, in urging baptism, said, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

It is by this Holy Spirit that we are able to believe that we are the children of God, especially when it doesn’t seem likely or even possible. Satan, whose name means “accuser”, wants to accuse you of your unworthiness to be God’s sons and daughters. He wants you to look at the hopeless situation out in the world. He wants you to look at the evil and sin in your heart. He wants you to

believe that you are not God's sons and daughters because of that. Yet you and I are not sons and daughters because of our worthiness. We are royal children by royal decree. Neither Satan or anyone else can change that.

Since our Heavenly Father is well-pleased with us and because we have the Holy Spirit dwelling within, we live as sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father, not because we have to, but because we are free to. We eagerly come to our Father's house, not as a religious duty, but because we want to. Why? It is here that He has washed us. It is here that He speaks to us. It is here that He feeds us.

Then we leave to joyfully serve our Father who has no needs by serving our neighbors in all of their needs. In addition, we want to tell them how they can join the family and become sons and daughters of our Father in heaven, too.

There's one last thing for us which was the first thing at Jesus' baptism. The text says, "the heavens were opened to him." Because of Jesus' perfect and complete ministry for all people and because of our baptisms by which we personally received the benefits of His ministry, heaven has been opened to each of us. It may not look like it now. We live lives of suffering where the world mocks us and rejects us, and we grow old, break down, and die. It doesn't seem much like sons and daughters of God in the world's view or in our view, but be patient. That will all change. The apostle John writes in his first epistle, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:1-2)

Being like Him, not only in our status as sons and daughters of the Father, but in our incorruptible and perfect bodies, we will be with Him forever in the place He has prepared for us. As children, we are also heirs – heirs of everything God has for us in Christ. In his vision of heaven, the

apostle John was told, "Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children." (Revelation 21:7)

As we begin the joyful season of Epiphany, let us remember the Baptism of our Lord where Jesus of Nazareth is revealed to be the Son of God and Savior of the world. In His baptism, the heavens were opened, the Holy Spirit came upon Him to anoint Him with power, and His Heavenly Father declared Him to be His Son with whom He is well pleased. Let us also remember our baptisms in which the reverse happens, God the Father declares us to be His sons and daughter through faith in what Jesus has done for us. The Holy Spirit descends upon us to create faith and anoint us with power. And heaven is opened up to us for all eternity. Baptisms *are* special events where special things still happen. Amen.