

Sermon Summary for December 9, 2010

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 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; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

When Jesus Went Down to the River

You know, the Baptists have all the fun with baptism. I guess the very nature of baptism of adults by immersion lends itself to all kinds of good humor.

There is the story of the seven-year-old son of a Baptist minister who decided to baptize his two cats. He chose the bathtub for this rite. One of the cats was a tiny kitten, and was dunked before it realized what had happened. But the old tom cat wanted no part in this ceremony. As the boy brought the cat down toward the water it hissed and clawed his arms furiously until finally the boy let go. The liberated cat scampered across the bathroom with only the back of its head getting a little water. As the cat ran from the room the boy called after it in disgust, "Fine, be a Lutheran if you want to!"

Then there was the old Baptist pastor who used to answer questions in his newsletter. One letter said, "Dear Preacher: Do you worry about pond scum in the baptismal font?" The preacher answered: "Dear Wondering: No, I'll baptize anybody."

Well, Christians disagree about baptism. They disagree about how much water to use, and they disagree about when to do it. We believe that new life in Christ can begin right from year one, and our baptistic friends say it can't happen until the person is old enough to make their own decision. So we agree to disagree. But every Christian agrees with this: Jesus Christ was baptized because He loves us.

1. Why was Jesus baptized?

John the Baptist was right in His instinct not to baptize Jesus. After all, He was baptizing in order to prepare Jews for the coming of Messiah. John's baptism was not Christian baptism, as we see in Acts 18. It was a baptism for Jews, to signify their repentance from sin. Jesus didn't need to be baptized to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. He was the Messiah! And He certainly didn't need to repent of any sin. So why did He insist on being baptized?

He answered the question very clearly. Jesus was baptized "*to fulfill all righteousness.*" What is righteousness in the Bible? It is perfect obedience to God's Word. It's something that not one of us has in ourselves. We all fall short of God's glory, and thus we are all, in ourselves, unrighteous in His sight (Rom. 3:23). Why did Jesus want to fulfill all righteousness? Because part of His mission was to do for us what we cannot do ourselves. We cannot be righteous before God by our own works. In fact, we cannot even repent properly.

When we try to repent of our sins, we are always hypocrites to some extent. No matter how sincere we are in our wills and emotions, there is always something within us that does not agree. No fallen sinner can repent

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perfectly. No son of Adam and Eve can make a “perfect act of contrition.” But Jesus can. And that day at the Jordan River, He did!

He identified with sinners so completely that He even took our place in the act of repentance. Going down into that river meant He was going down into the world of sinners, into our world. He was completely identifying Himself with the sinners He came to save.

2. When we are baptized...

That’s what happens when we are baptized. We are identified with Jesus Christ. No one baptizes himself. We “*are baptized into Christ*” (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27). The purpose of baptism is always two-fold: 1) For the assurance of salvation (2 Peter 3:21), and 2) as a call to identify with Christ in how we live (Rom. 6:4).

Jesus was baptized to identify Himself with his people as their Messiah. We are baptized so that we may be identified with Jesus, and go on to live Messianic lives. Not to be messiahs ourselves, but to be carriers of His life to others. We aren’t plague-carriers, we’re cross-carriers. And it’s the cross that transforms the world. We are to go into the world and identify with sinners so we can bring the message of the cross to them.

Sometimes we’re not even conscious that we’re doing it. There was a high school English teacher in Texas who told this story. A few days before the start of the school year one of her former students visited her in her classroom. She did not recognize the young man who knelt down beside her desk. “I have a wonderful wife, two little girls, and a good job,” he said. “I came to tell you that I graduated from high school because of you.” (She was desperately trying to remember who he was.) “I know you loved me when I was your student because you would walk around the room while you lectured, and you would stop at my desk and put your hand on my shoulder.” This teacher made a life-changing impact on this young man. “When you returned my papers,” he told her, “you always wrote something encouraging.”

This young man’s high school years were very difficult. His father had shot and killed his mother in a drunken argument. “The other teachers acted as if they despised me,” he said, “but you kept on treating me as if I was somebody. I wanted to thank you. It made all the difference in my life.”

It was then she remembered his name, and was able to respond to his story. She was bringing the love of God into his life without even knowing it, because she was simply trying to obey the Bible and love her neighbor as herself. That’s what our baptism calls us to, a life of love.

Certain people have special callings to identify with people’s suffering. Consider a certain mother named Marie. Marie’s only son died at age 17 of a drug overdose. For weeks the young mother was so wrapped in grief that she was unable to function. One day she went to talk with a friend, an older woman wise in the ways of the Lord. This friend said to Marie, “Give your sorrow to the Lord, and He will give you back one hundred fold of what you’ve lost.” I believe this was a particular word from the Holy Spirit to this woman. Here’s why. Marie and her friend prayed together on their knees. Then Marie got up and began to look for something she could do for others.

She began to connect with other mothers whose children were involved in drugs. She began trying to find a way to prevent the same tragedy that she experienced from happening to others. Today Marie works in a halfway house for young addicts. On her bulletin board she has close to a hundred snapshots of young men

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and women who call her “Mom.” The Lord did restore to her what she had lost a hundred-fold. The pain of losing her son is still there, and will always be there this side of heaven, but she has found her real purpose in life – to share the love of God with others. That’s what our baptism calls us to.

3. When Jesus came up from the river, we see the basics of the Christian life.

Jesus came up out of the river and received His Father’s blessing. *“This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.”* This shows that the Father was involved in every aspect of Jesus’ work. And then the Holy Spirit came upon Him in the form of a dove. That’s where His power came from.

When Jesus left His heavenly glory, He emptied Himself of His own power and authority. Everything He did on earth He did by the authority of the Father. And every sign and wonder was done through the power of the Holy Spirit. He was not alone in his mission, and neither are we.

The Father has planned the days of our lives for us. Even when we have sinned and run away from Him, He is always waiting for our return, to pick us up and start us on our feet again. No believer’s life is ever wasted, no matter what they’ve done or how long they have been rejecting the Gospel. God’s sovereign love and power rests upon us, dear ones, and in Christ He is well pleased, no matter what we’ve done or where we’ve been.

When we are baptized *“in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”* God calls us to Himself. Baptism doesn’t guarantee automatic salvation, but it does give assurance of God’s love to all who believe. Our baptism covers our whole life, right up to the hour of our death. That’s why we don’t re-baptize people who fall away and then return to Christ. They may have tried to leave the Lord, but the Lord has never left them. And His sovereign grace arches over their entire life. It’s the same for infants who may not hear the clear Gospel and consciously receive Christ until later in life. God was there in their infancy, calling them by name, from the very beginning. That’s how powerful God’s promise in baptism is.

And the presence of the Holy Spirit is also intimately connected with our baptism. That’s why on the Day of Pentecost the Word says that the Holy Spirit was *“poured out”* on God’s people. What happened that day is still happening. The Holy Spirit is pouring down on the church. But so often our hearts are closed and our hands are clenched rather than open to His grace.

In our Small Catechism Luther asks the question: “What does baptism with water signify?” The answer: “It signifies that the old Adam in us should, by daily sorrow and repentance, be drowned and die, with all sins and evil lusts; and again a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

A seasoned Norwegian pastor was asked one day, “If the old Adam has been drowned in baptism, why do we have to keep drowning him day after day?” The answer was, “The old rascal knows how to swim.” So the call is still always upon us: “Walk in newness of life.” And the struggle is always upon us, too.

But every day is new. Every morning we come up out of the river, where Jesus has come to us. Where He met us and cleansed us and made us new. We walk with Him up the river bank every day, to identify with and reach out to the world He died for.