

January 12, 2020  
First Sunday after the Epiphany  
Matthew 3:13–17

I.N.I.

Sermon preached by the Rev. Richard A. Lammert at Zion Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, IN

Theme: “Baptized into Christ”

In the name of ✠ Jesus. **Amen.**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ. In the Epiphany season, once we have celebrated the visit of the Wise Men, our focus is on the life of Christ during his earthly ministry before the time of his passion. On the first Sunday after the Epiphany each year we look at the baptism of our Lord. And thus today, our Gospel reading is on the baptism of Jesus. We consider our Gospel reading with the theme “Baptized into Christ.”

None of the three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, tell us much about the baptism of Jesus. The accounts of the three Evangelists together do not add up to the same length as St. Luke’s account of Jesus’ nativity. And the Gospel according to St. John makes no explicit mention of Jesus’ baptism at all.

The account we have for our Gospel reading today, St. Matthew’s account, includes one aspect that the other Evangelists do not mention. This is the interaction between John and Jesus. John does not think it appropriate to baptize Jesus, yet Jesus tells him that is fitting to baptize him. Since this is unique to Matthew, our initial look at Jesus’ baptism will focus on this interaction.

When Jesus came to John, in order to be baptized by him, John wanted to prevent this from happening. “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matt. 3:14). John asked a really good question.

Matthew reports that the people coming to John “were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matt. 3:6). John himself told the people, “I baptize you with water for repentance” (Matt. 3:11). Where does Jesus fit into this picture? John himself had pointed to Jesus (as told us by John, not Matthew) as the one who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

Jesus takes away sin; he doesn’t *have* sins that need to be taken away. He is, after all, the holy God, the second Person of the Trinity, although in human form. John was correctly confused. How could Jesus expect him to baptize someone who had no sin?

Yet Jesus responded to John, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15). It was fitting and right for John to baptize Jesus. I want to focus particularly on three words in that answer: *now*, *fulfill*, and *righteousness*.

We are quite familiar with the words from Galatians, words we heard again quite

recently, in the Christmas season: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son” (Gal. 4:4). Jesus was born at the appropriate time. In God’s providence, *everything* happens at the appropriate time. So, *now*. at the time of our Gospel reading, was the appropriate time for Jesus to be baptized.

Jesus was baptized to *fulfill* what God had promised in the Old Testament. Again, this is not a concept foreign to us. We know that Jesus came to fulfill the Old Testament. This fulfilling was not, however, just a scattering of a few events in Jesus’ life: he was born, he turned some water into wine, he was crucified, he arose again from the dead. No, *everything* in Jesus’ life was a fulfilling of the promises of God. And *now*, as Jesus came to John for baptism, was the time to begin fulfilling something having to do with righteousness.

Righteousness is the concept that Luther famously struggled with early in his life as a young professor of Bible at Wittenberg University. He thought it was something that he himself had to achieve, but he discovered that he could not achieve it. It was St. Paul’s words to the Romans that finally caught his attention: “In [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed” (Rom 1:17).

It is *God’s* righteousness that Jesus has in mind here. It is God’s righteousness that is revealed in the Old Testament. But at this point we run into the same roadblock as John the Baptist did. Didn’t Jesus already have the righteousness of God? Wasn’t he already by nature perfectly righteous, able to stand in the presence of God, his Father?

Indeed, he *was* perfectly righteous. It was God’s plan and purpose, however, to bring about righteousness for *all* people and to effect the salvation of *all* people. God had laid out the path of righteousness for all people by decreeing that his Son, Jesus Christ, take the sins of all humanity upon himself, and then give to sinful humans the righteousness of God.

This is the action that Luther called “the great exchange.” God placed the sin of all humanity upon his Son, and offered his perfect righteousness to sinful humans in exchange. It is the first part of that exchange (our sins to Jesus) that is our focus here; the second (Jesus’ righteousness for us) will come out for emphasis later.

Jesus took the sins of everyone upon himself. As a sinner, he *needed* to be baptized. Jesus represented any and every sinner as he stood before John. Did Jesus have sins that needed forgiveness? Yes—your sins and my sins. That’s why Jesus needed to be baptized. He was beginning his public ministry with his baptism, and by that baptism associated himself with sinful people. “For our sake [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21), as Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

It might seem that these considerations would make Jesus’ baptism a primary point of reference for our own, Christian baptism. Yet, no New Testament writer makes such a connection. Not even Jesus made a connection with his own baptism when he commanded that all nations should be baptized.

Although arguing from lack of evidence is always problematic, I might offer the following: The reason no connection is made is that Jesus’ baptism is not a model for Christian baptism. In other words, we are not baptized because Jesus was baptized.

Rather, Jesus was baptized because *we* need to be baptized.

We, who stand as sinners before God, need baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus needs baptism because he stands in our place. Jesus' baptism is a part of God's plan of salvation for all humanity. That plan of salvation continued with Jesus' earthly ministry, with his journeying to Jerusalem, with his suffering under Pontius Pilate, with his death on the cross of Calvary, with his resurrection and ascension. All that Jesus did was "for our sake," as I quoted from Paul earlier.

St. Paul does indeed refer to baptism, but speaks about being baptized into Jesus' death. You heard it in our Epistle reading this morning: "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" (Rom. 6:3–4).

Briefly stated, Paul says that since we died with Christ in baptism, we will also rise from the dead. This is most certainly true, as Luther said. But the phrase I want to focus on now is "baptized into Christ Jesus." Paul doesn't say "baptized like Christ," or "baptized in the same manner as Christ," but "baptized into Christ Jesus." That brings me—finally—to what I announced as the theme of the sermon: "Baptized into Christ." That is what our baptism is—but what does that mean?

St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Galatia: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). In our baptism we have put on Christ, that is, God has clothed us with Christ—not with the clothes that Christ wore, but with Christ himself; we might say, with the skin of Christ.

This is not a falsehood, as it was when Rebekah clothed her son Jacob with the best clothes of Esau, and placed the skins of young goats on his hands and neck, so that Isaac would bless him instead of Esau. The clothes and the skin were not Jacob's; he just pretended that they were his.

But when God clothes us with Christ, we really and truly are Christ's. When God looks at us, he sees his Son, Jesus Christ. What does that mean for us? St. Paul works through the meaning of "in Christ Jesus" in chapter eight of his letter to the Romans.

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:1–2). Because there is no condemnation for the holy Son of God, there is no condemnation for us. And if we are in Christ, the Spirit sets us free from the law. Notice the connection: baptized into Christ—put on Christ—have the Spirit. Just so that there is no uncertainty: The Holy Spirit comes with baptism; there is no separate baptism of the Holy Spirit.

St. Paul continues a little later in Romans: "You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you" (Rom. 8:9–11).

January 12, 2020—Preached by the Rev. Richard A. Lammert. Page 3

Paul continues talking about having the Spirit of God, and, as in our Epistle reading, connects this with the resurrection of the dead to everlasting life. Paul is not waffling by saying “if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.” Read the phrase in the whole context with Lutheran eyes: Baptized into Christ—have put on Christ—have the Spirit. If you are baptized into Christ, you have the Spirit.

Then St. Paul writes: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom. 8:14–15). Paul’s words can once again cause consternation to American Christians: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God.” An American Evangelical response will likely be: “Am I *really* led by the Spirit?”

But that, of course, is the wrong question. Paul has continued to string his argument together, and it all began with “being in Christ.” We don’t cause ourselves to be led by the Spirit in any case. Just look again at our Collect of the Day, addressed to God the Father: “Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as Your children.”

It is only God’s action, through the Holy Spirit, that brings us to faith and keeps us in the faith. Let God do his work of keeping you in the faith by hearing his word faithfully and by eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus faithfully, then—to get back to Paul—you will be able to cry, “Abba! Father!”

That brings us back to Jesus’ baptism. The Father spoke from heaven at Jesus’ baptism, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). Being baptized into Christ, you stand in exactly the same place. God says to you “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” and you can—and do—respond “Abba! Father!”

Lest I leave one thread hanging, I return to the great exchange I mentioned earlier. I said then that we have in the first part Jesus taking the sins of all humanity upon himself in Jesus’ baptism. I left the second part, that God offers sinful humanity the righteousness of Jesus in exchange, unexplained. I can now return to that.

We see with Paul’s argument that everything is contingent upon the “in Christ.” All who are baptized into Christ have all the promises: the Spirit, everlasting life, sonship. Being baptized into Christ and thereby putting on Christ is the summary of salvation.

St. Paul talks about being heirs also in the eighth chapter of Romans, but I will conclude with its mention in our Collect of the Day: “Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as Your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life.”

Come, enjoy the foretaste of your inheritance at our Lord’s table, as you eat the body and drink the blood of God’s beloved Son and your Brother, Jesus Christ. Come, you sons and daughters of God, to what God, in his mercy abundantly gives you.

In the name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**