

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday after Epiphany, January 8, 2012

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 244, 63:5, 134, 328, 54.

Lessons: Jeremiah 1: 4-10, Acts 10: 34-38, Matthew 3: 1-17.

Text: Luke 3:21-22

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

You heard in our Gospel lesson that John refused to baptize Pharisees and Sadducees because they showed no fruits of repentance. He was reluctant to baptize Jesus because Jesus had no sins to confess, nothing of which to repent. Jesus did not need baptism for repentance as others did, but Jesus, who knew God's purpose in His life, insisted that he be baptized. We can't say how well John knew Jesus. He certainly knew of Jesus, because their mothers were relatives, and Jesus' mother, Mary, had visited John's mother Elizabeth before both were born.

Jesus is not baptized as a sinner, but as an obedient Son. Why then was He baptized by John? At least four reasons seem evident: (1) to connect Himself with John, the prophet who prepared the way for the Messiah, (2) to identify Himself with the sinful race He came to redeem, (3) to establish the course of His own ministry, and (4) to officially to begin that ministry.

All four evangelists record Jesus' baptism: Mark tells us *"As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"* Mark 1:10-11

We read in Luke 3:21-22: *"When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"*

And the evangelist John tells us that John who baptized him said *"I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel." Then John gave this testimony: 'I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."* (John 1:31-34)

Jesus of Nazareth, the very Son of God, is now in a state of humiliation. He chose to come to earth and not to make full use of his heavenly power and glory so that he might live and die in a lowly way.

Christ's baptism was his first public appearance. Although he himself was sinless, he took upon himself the likeness of sinful flesh; and thus, for our sakes, he sanctified himself, that we also might be sanctified, and be baptized with him, *"For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified."* John 17:19. Today, as

JESUS, THE CHRIST, IS BAPTIZED, LET US BE REMINDED THAT

- 1. Jesus is surely the Son of God.**
- 2. Jesus is part of the Triune God.**
- 3. His real work can now commence.**

Jesus was a person of prayer. This is especially emphasized in Luke's Gospel. It was while Jesus was praying following his baptism that heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit, also called "the Holy Ghost", descended on Jesus in bodily form like a dove. The visible descent of the dove was public witness to the fact

that here truly is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One. Jesus did not become the Son of God at his baptism. He was true God from eternity. His baptism and the appearance of the Holy Spirit as a dove together with the voice from Heaven is one more assurance of that fact. At his Baptism, we clearly see that he was anointed with the Holy Spirit and power. And at his baptism, we once again see the scriptural teaching of what we call the Triune God, the Trinity: three persons in one God.

Jesus' baptism is one of the occasions when God revealed himself as triune. It is true that the Bible never uses the words 'triune' or 'Trinity', but the Christian church has long and properly used them to express what the only true and living God has revealed about himself in the Scriptures, namely, that he exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. (See the Athanasian Creed on page 53 in The Lutheran Hymnal.) These three distinct persons are one God. They share equally in all the works and all the attributes of God. Nevertheless, we properly speak of creation as the special work of the Father, redemption as the special work of the Son, and sanctification as the special work of the Holy Spirit. In these truths all Christians agree.

Jesus did not disagree with John's statement about John's need for baptism and forgiveness from Jesus. It was true that John was a sinner and Jesus was without sin. But Jesus told John to baptize him anyway. The explanation he gave was, "***it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.***" But what did he mean by that? It was not a legal requirement like Jesus' keeping of the Ten Commandments; because baptism is gospel, not law. Jesus was simply saying that this was what the Father wanted them to do, and that was enough explanation for John.

Jesus assured John that it was proper for him to be baptized and for John to perform the baptism "***to fulfill all righteousness.***" It was John's obligation as God's messenger and Jesus' obligation as the Promised One to inaugurate God's plan of salvation. By insisting on being baptized, Jesus deliberately took our place as God the Father had sent him to do. "***God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.***" 2 Corinthians 5:21 Officially the work of redemption began here and was completed on Calvary.

Jesus' baptism identified him with the world of sinners. Paul describes Christ's substitution for sinners by telling us, "***God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.***" 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul, by the inspiration of God, certainly placed his stamp of approval on John's baptism. In his letters, Paul also plainly indicates that he also wants us to receive the blessings of baptism. Jesus' baptism and the testimony of the Father and of the Holy Spirit publicly identified Jesus as the Lamb of God, who had come to take away the sin of the world.

The baptism itself is not described. Matthew simply states that it took place. The manner in which John applied the water to Jesus is not indicated, and this again tells us that we are not limited to any one particular method of applying the water when we baptize today. Jesus coming "***up out of the water***" Matthew 3:16 simply means that he stepped up onto the bank of the river and does not give us a clear indication of exactly how John applied the water to Jesus in his baptism. So those who point to Jesus' baptism and conclude that he was immersed in the river Jordan are going beyond what Scripture says.

The opening of the heavens after Jesus' baptism was much more than the parting of clouds so that the sun could shine through. It was more like the experience of the prophet Ezekiel: "***The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God***" Ezekiel 1:1 Or we think of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. "***Look, he said, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God***" Acts 7:56 We cannot say whether only Jesus saw heaven open or whether John saw it too.

Note that Scripture nowhere prescribes the mode of baptism – whether by immersion, pouring or sprinkling. Rather, it concerns itself with what God does for us through baptism.

But John did see the Holy Spirit come down on Jesus in the form of a dove. The Holy Spirit assumed the visible form of a dove. This kind of situation may be comparable to the occasions when angels appeared in human form. They did not become human beings or borrow the bodies of human beings; they simply assumed that visible form. The bodily form of a dove was appropriate for the Holy Spirit, for the dove is used in Scripture as a symbol of innocence and peace. This dove reminds us of the dove Noah sent out from the ark. That dove returned carrying an olive branch, which has become a symbol of peace. Peter calls the waters of the Flood a symbol of baptism in 1 Peter 3:21.

Jesus was not without the Holy Spirit before this. After all, he had been conceived by the Holy Spirit before he was born of the Virgin Mary. At this time the Holy Spirit bestowed upon Jesus the special gifts he would need to carry out the responsibilities of his office as the Messiah. The prophet Isaiah had foretold what these gifts would include: ***"The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD"*** Isaiah 11:2 In Isaiah 61:1 Christ speaks to us personally: ***"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,"*** In the synagogue in Nazareth Jesus quoted these words and applied them to himself, stating, ***"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"*** Luke 4:21

Then the Father spoke from heaven, acknowledging Jesus as his beloved Son. About three years later, near the end of Jesus' ministry, the Father spoke similar words from heaven on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5). The Father was pleased with everything his beloved Son did and endured for our salvation. So we may also be certain that we are reconciled to God and are heirs of everlasting life because of what Jesus did.

John the Baptist's activity and proclamation were a sign to Jesus that the hour had come for him to enter upon his redemptive work. Jesus had left Nazareth and came to John at the Jordan River without being compelled. He asked John to baptize him and in this way to inaugurate or anoint him into his office as our prophet, priest, and king.

What was the purpose and why was this necessary? The purpose we learn in Acts 10:38: ***"God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power."*** With this God publicly set him apart for his great task. At the same time, with the Spirit at his side, he was also empowered to carry out that task. This was necessary, for we read in Philippians 2:7-8 that Christ Jesus ***"made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!"*** This explains much of his agony in Gethsemane and lets us understand how he was able to overcome although he was a true human being, our substitute. Here, at his baptism, the coming of the Holy Spirit on him is also the Spirit's designation that this human being is indeed the promised Savior, the Son of God.

Then came the Father's voice from heaven. The Father clearly identified Jesus as his Son. With the word ***"love"*** he did not express a mere sentimental attachment, but expressed his complete approval of what Jesus was undertaking for the descendants of Adam and Eve. The Father also expressed his complete confidence in Jesus by saying, ***"With you I am well pleased."*** He publicly acknowledged he had not made a mistake in assigning this task to Jesus. God thereby also acknowledged that Jesus' previous life on earth – in Bethlehem, Egypt and Nazareth – had been sinless, without fault. He had not become guilty of the mortal error – sin – into which Adam and Eve had fallen. Thus Christ's credentials were perfect. We are to know that fact, even as Jesus himself was assured of that at his baptism.

Jesus has now begun his ministry of paying the price for the sins of all men. ***"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved."*** Mark 16:16

***"In meekness stands the Lamb of God
And, sinless, sanctifies the wave,
Mankind from sin to cleanse and save.
"All glory, Jesus, be to Thee
For this Thy glad epiphany;
Whom with the Father we adore
And Holy Ghost forevermore." Amen.***
The Lutheran Hymnal 131:3 & 5