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Epiphany 1, Baptism of our Lord

**Christ Is manifested as God's Son and Anointed Servant**

**Matt. 3: 13-17**

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?"

But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him.

When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him.

And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our heavenly Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every Sunday in our Creed we confess together that we believe in a mystery which lies at the heart of all of Scripture, a mystery which far surpasses our reason and our experience and which we receive purely by faith—that the one true God who has made us and redeemed us is three distinct and coequal Persons and yet is still truly One in divine Essence. In our text for this Feast of our Lord's Baptism, St. Matthew provides for us one of the most striking revelations in all of Scripture of that mystery.

All of the divine Nature is and is in the Father who speaks from heaven His approval of His incarnate Son. All of that same divine Nature is and is in the Son who has taken up our flesh as His own and who here receives baptism from His cousin John. As we confess together, He is truly "of one substance with the Father." And all of that same divine, infinite Being is in and is the Holy Spirit who, in our text, descends from heaven in the form of a Dove to rest upon the Son and to anoint Him as our great Prophet, Priest, and King. On the basis of Scripture, the Church insists that also the Spirit "who eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son" is truly "of one substance" with them. The Father's voice from heaven, the incarnate Son who is baptized here, the Holy Spirit in visible form resting on Him—it is of these three fully distinct Persons that Moses has taught us to say, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." The great epiphany given to us here at the River Jordan reveals to us the divinity of Christ Jesus and the triune Being of the one true God of love—three fully distinct Persons who are nevertheless truly One.

In a sermon for this same Feast of our Lord's baptism, Martin Luther called this text from Matthew's Gospel the "center of all of Scripture" to which all the prophets point and of which all the apostles and evangelists bear witness. Here our faith is fed with this picture of our triune God. Here Christ is anointed with the Spirit for His mission as our Redeemer. And here we receive a precious illustration of what also you and I are given in our baptisms—the forgiveness Christ has won for us, new life for our souls, and the anointing and gifting we as the Body of Christ need to do His work.

## I

We note that John is at first reluctant to baptize Jesus. John administered a "baptism of repentance for the remission of sins," Scripture tells us. He was fully aware of his own need for such forgiveness, and he had come to understand that his Cousin, Mary's Son, was the One whom the God of Israel had sent to redeem the world from sin. "I need to be baptized by You," he says to Jesus, "and are You coming to me?"

Jesus answers, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." It was the Father's plan that, in our place and as our Substitute, Jesus should "fulfill all righteousness." That was why He had come—to follow His Father's righteous and saving will in every particular. He had come to obey fully the demands of the Law that we love God perfectly and love our neighbors as ourselves. He had come to obey His Father by suffering in our stead the penalty for our lovelessness. Now He would receive John's baptism because that, too, was His Father's will.

And with His baptism, Jesus' takes up in earnest His role as the Christ of God. Through the prophet Isaiah the Father had pointed to this event by the River Jordan and had said, "Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My chosen One in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him." Here in His baptism, Jesus is anointed with the Holy Spirit for His task. He who according to His divine nature is from all eternity one in Essence with the Spirit receives here the complete outpouring of the Spirit also according to His humanity; also in His human nature, He receives in fullest measure all the gifts of the Spirit which He will need in His saving work. As our Prophet, He receives eloquence and grace, and His preaching of the Kingdom of God is filled with the Spirit's convincing power. As our great High Priest who would offer Himself as the sacrifice for our sin, He is anointed with the strength and perseverance He will need to endure the hatred of His enemies and the pain and death they will inflict on Him. Here at the Jordan River, Jesus is baptized in order to "fulfill all righteousness"—that He might obey His Father's will in every way—and He is anointed for His work as our Savior from sin and death.

## II

And here in Jesus' baptism, we are also given wonderful instruction about the saving mystery of the baptism which you and I have received.

At the baptismal font, water was poured over us at the command of Christ Jesus Himself. We were baptized in the name of the triune God who is shown to us in our text—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We were united to the Son in that baptism—St. Paul tells us we “put on Christ” as our holiness in the eyes of the Father—so that also concerning each of us all righteousness is fulfilled. The life which He offered up for us on the cross of Calvary, the complete forgiveness which He purchased for us there with His blood, His triumphant resurrection-victory over death—in our baptisms, all that redemption was poured out upon us and made ours. There at the baptismal font, faith hears the voice of the Father proclaiming, “Also this one is My beloved (child), in whom I am well pleased.” And therefore, when Satan attacks us and shows us our sin and the grave which looms before us, you and I do not need to fear. With Martin Luther, we can say, “You are right, Devil. I am a sinner, just as you say. Nevertheless, I am baptized. The Lord has promised that He forgives me for the sake of His dear Son. He cannot and will not go back on His word.”

That truth about the blessings of baptism is of special comfort to us today. A few weeks ago, our fellow-member and friend George Beckette was taken to the hospital, and on Wednesday of the week before Epiphany Sunday he died. And though we will miss George, we can know with confidence that even now he is in the presence of our triune God in whose name he was baptized. There at his baptism, also George Beckette received all that Christ Jesus won for him. And George lived the faith which the Holy Spirit worked in his heart through that “washing of water with the word.” Because he knew that his faith was the work of our Lord Himself, George was as faithful as his health allowed him to be in hearing the Gospel-Word and in receiving the Holy Sacrament of our Lord's Body and Blood. Word and Sacrament nourished his faith until the day when our Lord called him home.

## III

On this Feast of our Lord's Baptism, we are also shown the anointing with the Holy Spirit that we have received in order that we may carry out the blessed work that Christ Jesus has given to us.

We are His body here on earth, Scripture teaches us. It is through our voices that He speaks His Word of pardon and proclaims His life-giving Gospel to a dying world. And in this world so full of selfishness and cruelty, He still bears witness to the divine life which His word imparts

through acts of love and kindness. We, who have been baptized to be His body, are His hands and His feet through which He serves those who have little, through which He helps those in need, through which He reaches out to those who are lonely and need a friend. In our baptisms, as St. Paul reminds us, we were anointed with His Spirit and equipped with all the gifts that we need for our appointed tasks in His kingdom—to share His word and to witness to our Savior by walking in His footsteps.

May the Holy Spirit strengthen the faith in Christ which was given to us in our baptism, and may He help us to carry out the work of the Church, for Jesus' sake. Amen.