

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
The First Sunday of Epiphany – The Baptism of our Lord
January 9, 2022
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl

Jesus was baptized too.

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might be the Christ. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But someone mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. While 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. I am well pleased with you.”

—Luke 3:15-17,21,22

Are you ever surprised by the way God does things in your life? You know the saying, “God works in mysterious ways.” Are you ever surprised by those ways? You read through the Bible and you can see many surprises that God gave to his people: things that they would not have expected. But things that worked out for their well-being and benefit. Surprise, Mary! You are going to be with child even though you are a virgin, and this child will be the Savior of the world. Surprise! That has to be the greatest surprise that God gave to all of mankind. What an awesome surprise Christmas is!

Well, in our sermon text for today, we step into a time thirty years later, and Jesus gives John the Baptist a tremendous surprise. Luke says, “**When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too**” (Luke 3:21). And that just floored John.

In Matthew’s Gospel account we learn more about the conversation between Jesus and John the Baptist. When John the Baptist came to Jesus and saw that Jesus was seeking to be baptized, John was astonished. He was surprised. You can just hear the surprise in John’s voice. “What! No, Jesus, I can’t baptize you. You see, I baptize *sinners*. I baptize people with water for repentance. Jesus, you’re holy. You never sin. Jesus, why are you seeking a sinner’s baptism? What’s more...I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” That’s the conversation that John had with Jesus.

And he had a good point, didn’t he? Jesus was the sinless, spotless, perfect Son of God, who never did anything wrong. Jesus certainly didn’t need a baptism for his own sins, because he didn’t have any sins. But Jesus didn’t argue with John. John was right. He wasn’t fit to baptize Jesus. Jesus didn’t need a baptism for himself. But Jesus came to be baptized by John for a very important purpose. In a sense Jesus wanted to reveal his true identity. He was making an epiphany; an appearing. He was turning the lights on. Jesus revealed to John and to all of us *who* he is and *what* he came to this earth to do. Both of those points – *who* he is and *what* he came to do – are clearly marked in the baptism that John gave to Jesus.

One of the things that just jumps off of the page as you study this account of Scripture is how the Trinity, the Triune God, is actively involved in Jesus’ baptism. There is no doubt who this person is. There is no doubt that Jesus is the Son of God. Luke records for us, “**While [Jesus] 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; I am well pleased with you”**” (Luke 3:22).

The Father and the Spirit team identify Jesus. They show *who* Jesus is. John the Baptist’s entire ministry was designed to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah. He was the forerunner. He was the one who went ahead and heralded, “Someone greater is coming after me.” Now imagine John standing in the Jordan. He just baptized Jesus. And all of a sudden the heavens tear open and the Spirit of God marks Jesus as the voice declares, “**You are my Son, whom I love; I am well pleased with you.**” Big Red Arrows! Signaling: this is the guy. This is my Son.

This declaration must have been such a comfort for John. Was John surprised that Jesus was seeking a sinner’s baptism? He indicated it as much, didn’t he? But by that baptism it was revealed that Jesus really is the Son of God in flesh, Emmanuel—God with us. What a boost of comfort and confidence this was for John as he would continue in his work as the forerunner. But what a tremendous comfort and assurance for us as well! We aren’t left to our own guess or speculation. Jesus is clearly identified as true God. “**You are my Son!**” the Father boldly declared. That statement takes all the guess work out. It leaves no doubts. Mormons and those who do not believe that Jesus is the true Son of God close their ears of unbelief and cry out, “I can’t hear you.” They must do that, because Jesus is clearly being identified as the true Son of God.

Isn’t that remarkable? By Jesus’ baptism, he reveals, he shows forth, he makes clear, he makes an epiphany of who he is. He is the Son of God. It’s really sad when all of the signs and all of the signals are clearly given and yet people still toss Jesus aside as Joe-Schmoe Carpenter from Nazareth, nothing more. That’s what the Pharisees and Jewish leaders did. They heard John’s testimony, “**I baptize you with water. But someone mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing shovel is**

in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:16,17). All the people who came out to listen to John heard his testimony very clearly. This is the one who would give the Holy Spirit. This is the one who would purify us from all unworthy dross and make us holy. This is the one who can save us from the eternal fires of hell. But they ignored it. Their unbelief pushed the truth aside. And these people who were designated as the teachers of the law were the very ones who three years later slapped Jesus in the face and accused him of blasphemy when he truthfully declared under oath to be the Christ, the Son of God. It’s really sad when people openly reject Jesus as the Savior even though all the markers clearly identify him as the only true Savior.

But isn’t that what we do every time we sin? Oh, every time we have a sinful thought flash in our mind, a sinful word slip on our tongue, or a sinful action committed in our life, we foist ourselves higher than Jesus the Son of God and say, “My ways are better than your ways.” That’s what we do when we sin, isn’t it? When we put seductive images in our heads, we are telling God that his command to keep our thoughts pure is not good enough. When we use our words to run somebody down rather than to build him up, we are telling God that we don’t agree with his command to love others. We slap him in the face as we follow our desires rather than his desires. By the things we do, we sometimes indicate that we really don’t think the person of Jesus, namely, the Son of God, is really all that important to us in our lives.

But it is for that very reason that Jesus was baptized. Jesus was baptized to reveal not only *who* he was but also *what* he came to this earth to do. Thirty years before Jesus was baptized, he made a different trek to Judea, right? It was in his mother’s womb. The angel announced it to Joseph when he found out that Mary was pregnant. **“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus…”** Why? **“because he will save his people from their sins”** (Matthew 1:21). If this were a movie, we would see the subtitle, “Thirty years later.” There’s a lot of silence during those thirty years. The only thing we hear about is what Jesus did when he was twelve years old at the temple. But here we jump to the time when he was thirty years old.

After thirty years of relative silence, the baptism of Jesus is heaven’s way of validating the Son of Mary as the Son of God to the world. The world is to know that Jesus of Nazareth has divine authority to complete his saving work. Jesus’ baptism signaled that the time has arrived. It was now time for Jesus to enter a preordained work which will lead the way to the cross and empty tomb. He enters this work through John’s baptism. How does that happen? In the Old Testament, prophets, priests, and kings were often anointed with oil to set them apart for a very special task. We heard about David being anointed as the next king of Israel in our first reading for today. Well, Jesus was also anointed for a very special task, but it wasn’t with oil. It was with the Holy Spirit. Jesus was set aside; he was anointed, to fulfill a very important work.

Oh, John might have been surprised when Jesus came and told him that he needed to be baptized by him. But Jesus doesn’t leave John in the dark. Matthew tells us in his Gospel that Jesus said to John, **“It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness”** (Matthew 3:15). Things are not what they seem, John. You may think that it isn’t right for the Son of God to seek a sinner’s baptism. But this request is actually very important because his request somehow involves “righteousness.”

From the beginning of his life, all the way back to the time when Jesus was a little baby, our Lord Jesus was actively living the kind of life, free from sin, which God demanded of everyone. **“Be holy because I the Lord your God am holy”** God said in Leviticus 19:2. Jesus fulfilled God’s standard perfectly. Jesus would continue to live in perfect righteousness as our great Substitute after his baptism. He would continue to fulfill the demands that God gave in his law.

What Jesus still needed to do, however, was to pay the debt of our sins. He needed to suffer hell in our place. He needed to take our sins and shortcomings on himself. Now the time had come for Jesus to enter this next phase of his saving work. At Jordan’s bank Jesus willfully entered that phase of his ministry in which he would allow his life to be taken as a sacrificial atonement. John was a prophetic finger which pointed the way to the cross when he said, **“Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”** (John 1:29). Jesus was baptized to reveal himself as the Savior who came to be numbered with the sinners. He now embarks on a journey to make a sacrifice for sins, wedding the “passive” half of righteousness to its “active” half, in order to **“fulfill all righteousness.”** And he does this *willingly*.

What better way to signal, not just his willingness, but his actual entry into this next part of life than to receive John’s baptism. Remember: John preached a baptism expressly for the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, Jesus wants to stand beside his “brothers and sisters” in the Jordan. He wants to receive the baptism they are receiving. To receive the baptism they are receiving will identify him very clearly: this is God’s sacrificial Lamb who bears the world’s sins and who will win forgiveness for all!

Something that seemed like such a surprise to John was such a tremendous statement to the world. Jesus shows how the sinner is saved. It is through him, and him alone. He entered this world to be identified with sinners. He entered this world to take the place of sinners. **“So... Jesus was baptized too.”** How about that for a surprise? For all of the times when I sinned against Jesus, this Son of God willingly and boldly put himself in my place and said, “Your sins are my sins.” It was with John’s baptism that Jesus was signaling to the entire world: “Let’s bring it on. I’m ready. I’m willing. I’m here for a mission. The mission is to save you from your sins.” What an awesome surprise!

But here's one more surprise for you today. Jesus' life becomes your life in *your* baptism. In a way that I cannot fully explain, God uses the water connected to his Word as a means to make you his own child. In a way that I cannot fully explain, God reaches down into your life and says, "I have washed away your sins. I have saved you and given you eternal life with me." In a way that I cannot fully explain, God comes down to us in the waters of our baptism and say, "You are my son. You are my daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." In a way that I cannot fully explain, God anoints me, he anoints you, and sets us apart so that we find our true identity in the fact that he has adopted us into his family and we find strength to live our lives as his children.

Why can he say those things about you and me? Why? Because our baptisms are God's work, not ours. I regularly fail in living as his child. But because my baptism is God's work and not mine, I take great comfort that I am still God's child because he has connected me to Jesus in my baptism.

And you know what that means? No matter what kind of life you have led, no matter what kind of life you are facing right now, your certainty of salvation is not dependent on how well you perform for God. No. Your certainty of forgiveness and salvation is entirely dependent on what God has claimed you to be by his grace.

And that's great news! That's freeing news. You are now free to live without fear. You are now free to live a life of thankfulness because you are God's child, connected to him through the one who was baptized too. You are connected to God forever because he claims you as his own through his Son Jesus. Rejoice in the fact that "Jesus was baptized too." Rejoice also in the fact, "You were baptized too." Amen.