

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The Twelve Days of Christmas have passed. We have begun a new church season, Epiphany. And suddenly, now we find Jesus as an adult. We find Jesus at the very place where people have been confessing the very thing that Jesus came to save them from: their sins.

Today, we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord. On this day, Jesus began His public march to the cross for you and me.

Out in the wilderness of Judea we find John the Baptist preaching, "***Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand***" (Matthew 3:2). This odd-looking man wearing camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist who ate an odd diet of locusts and wild honey was gaining quite a following. It appeared that everyone wanted to hear John's preaching, repent, and be baptized by him, including some Pharisees and Sadducees, who hoped to sneak in without confessing their sins.

But among this crowd was Jesus. He "***came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him***" (Matthew 3:13).

Now, everyone in line to be baptized by John was a sinner in need of repentance. That is, everyone except Jesus.

So, why is Jesus there? Well, He is there for the same purpose. He is there to be baptized by John. But, why?

Does Jesus need to repent? Does Jesus need to be converted from unbelief to faith? Is Jesus among the lost sheep of Israel?

John knows the answer. He wanted to prevent Jesus from being baptized. And not because Jesus was unrepentant. It was because Jesus knew no sin.

If the roles were reversed, John would have been fine if Jesus baptized him, because he was a sinner who stood in need of baptism. But John baptizing Jesus?

No! John said, ***“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”*** (Matthew 3:14).

Now, as you recall, John had refused to baptize some people in the past. But that was because those people refused to repent for their sins. Now, John has the opposite dilemma. A dilemma that likely he thought would never happen to him: Should I baptize someone who is without sin?

As John attempts to say “no” to Jesus, Jesus breaks the tension saying, ***“Let it be so now, for thus is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness”*** (Matthew 3:15). In other words, Jesus is saying: *“Allow it. I know this is out of the ordinary, but this needs to be accomplished, so I can be the sin-bearer.”*

At any other time, John’s argument to deny a baptism might be valid, but **now** is the time for Jesus to begin His public ministry.

Before this, Jesus was relatively unknown. He grew up in the obscure town of Nazareth. A town that most Jews thought very little of. ***“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”*** (John 1:46)

While in Nazareth, Jesus had been living in perfect obedience to God the Father as a man in the place of all men. But now, on the banks of the Jordan, He is publicly beginning His course that will take Him to the cross, where He will give His life as a ransom for many. Although He knew no sin, Jesus is declaring Himself to be one with sinners by taking up the burden of sin.

Here, in the Jordan, Jesus is inaugurating His public redeeming work. In doing so, He is linking Himself to a sinner’s baptism to fulfill all righteousness.

But an obvious question is why now? Why at age 30 is Jesus being baptized? Is this proof that we choose to be baptized, rather than receiving baptism?

Well, back during the earthly life of Jesus, John’s baptism was new. John’s baptism was in preparation for the Messiah.

What was common was circumcision. On the eighth day of a Jewish boy’s life, he would be circumcised and formally given his name. Circumcision is what made a Jew a Jew. It’s what marked them as one grafted into Israel.

Circumcision was a sign on the flesh, like a branding or tattoo. It was something that marked them as a child of the promise and as the offspring of Abraham.

So, circumcision, then, is akin to baptism today. As an eight-day old child, they are not making decisions. Just like infants today. Almighty God chose Mary and Joseph, because He knew His ceremonial Law would be fulfilled upon Him. The Son of God knew His earthly parents would be faithful to the Law, so He would submit to His own covenant of blood.

All infants have is childlike faith in their parents to provide their needs. And one of those needs is baptism and the benefits baptism provides: forgiveness of sins, salvation from eternal death and the devil, and eternal salvation.

For us, because Jesus fulfilled all righteousness by linking Himself to us through a sinner's baptism, we no longer are circumcised with hands to make us a child of God. Instead, we are ***“circumcised with a circumcision without hands ... having been buried with Him in baptism, in which [we are] raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised [Christ] from the dead”*** (Colossians 2:11, 12).

Our circumcision is by water and the Spirit. Our Baptismal circumcision cannot be seen but is more permanent. It's a union with Christ. Through Baptism, we are marked as a child and heir of God.

For us, we don't choose God. He chose us! Christ even says this to His own disciples: ***“You did not choose me, but I chose you”*** (John 15:16). Even His own disciples needed that reminder, just as we do.

Our own free will is to turn away from God, which is seen so much in society. That is what our sinful nature desires. But it is through the Holy Spirit that has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with His gifts, sanctified us and kept us in the true faith. This is what Baptism does. Baptism is God choosing us. All we do is receive. And He gives us faith.

Christ's baptism by John is vicarious. He is baptized not for Himself, but for us sinners. Through Christ's baptism, He is pointing forward to His death and resurrection as the substitute for all sinners.

When John consented and 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; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’”*** (Matthew 3:17-17).

God the Father is well pleased because His Son has fulfilled all righteousness, and now it is time for Jesus to be the sacrificial Lamb for sinners.

For the triune God – the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit – everything has a purpose. Jesus was baptized so He would take on our sins to the cross. So that through His sacrificial death and bodily resurrection, our sins would be forgiven through our baptism into Christ.

At your baptism, God the Father looked down upon you – like He did for His own Son, and said, ***“I am well pleased.”*** He is pleased, because He chose you in the waters of Holy Baptism as His adopted child to inherit the Kingdom of God.

But as we all know, our Old Adam – *our old sinful nature* – continuously shows up and urges us to turn away from God, and our neighbor. This is why confession and absolution is linked to our Baptism. So, daily our Old Adam is put to death, and a new person who lives by faith in Christ is raised up. This is the rhythm of the Christian: we sin, we repent, and we live. And each time we repent and turn back to God, He says to us: ***“I am well pleased.”***

The Rite of Confirmation is also linked to our Baptism as well. For Jesus says, ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”*** (Matthew 28:19-20a). So, to Josh, Faith, and Laura when you make your confession to God and to this congregation in just minutes, guess what God will be saying? ***“I am well pleased.”***

He is well pleased, because we are saved through His Son Jesus who fulfilled all righteousness in the place of all sinners. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +