

**Sermon - Jan. 9, 2022**  
"Jesus identifies with us"  
The Baptism of Our Lord

Today's readings:

Isaiah 43:1-7

Romans 6:1-11

Luke 3:15-22

**Gospel reading:**

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison. Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

+++

Grace to you and peace from God the Father of us and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I'm wearing my baptismal shell today. It's the earliest symbol of the Christian church, and of our baptismal identity. We have Jesus being baptized today in the Luke version, although you may have been surprised that we don't get the conversation between John the Baptist and Jesus, with John objecting to Jesus wanting to be baptized by him. John was expecting Jesus to do something other than what Jesus had initially come to do. John is the last of the Old Testament prophets, the last and greatest. John's expectation was that when Jesus shows up, judgment would come; and when that doesn't happen, that's when we hear John, now in prison, confused, asking "are you the one or should we be looking for someone else?"

John has a parallax view of the Christ coming into the world with grace and mercy and forgiveness but also with judgment. From the Old Testament folks point of view they see these two events, one in front of the other, and they think judgment is going to happen right now. But it's not exactly what's going to happen, at least for John, and that's why Jesus has to say to him...*let me explain, no it's too much; let me sum up. We're going to do this for all righteousness sake. There's a lot for me to explain, John, maybe more than you can take in right now.*

Jesus tells John they need to perform his baptism, partly because what Jesus is going to do is take on the sins of the world. This is all about **identity**. Jesus is going to be identified with sinners. That's why John doesn't want to do it. "This baptism is for sinners. You're the holy one of God. That's why you should baptize me, not me you. You're the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. Why would you be coming to me for baptism?"

But Jesus needs to do it, to be identified with us. That's why we have this wonderful text in our epistle that really makes that clear.

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. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6)

Paul is talking about the Great Exchange. Jesus takes on our sins and in exchange gives us his righteousness. When does this take place? Well, we certainly see the work happen at the cross, but when does he take the sins of the world upon himself? I would submit to you that he does it right here, at the baptism. That's why St. Paul is making the powerful connection between our baptism and Jesus' crucifixion. So it only makes sense that it's in Jesus' baptism, which connects Him to us, that this work takes place. That's why Jesus' baptism is so important.

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. (Romans 6:6)

He takes our sins. We receive his righteousness. That's why he tells John it's to fulfill all righteousness. It's also why Martin Luther referred to it as an *alien* righteousness. A righteousness that comes not from ourselves, for our own righteousness is like filthy rags. It's why St. Paul also writes

**21** But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. **22** This righteousness is given through faith in<sup>[a]</sup> Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, **23** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:21-23 NIV)

It's repeated in Chapter 6 in our Epistle lesson and makes a strong case.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

It would not be possible, all of this, except Jesus willingly takes on our sins as he becomes baptized. He exits the waters a sinner – the sinner of sinners in a sense – because the sins of the world have been laid upon him. Like a scapegoat. Remember in the Old Testament, if your sins were placed upon the scapegoat and the goat was set free to wander off into the wilderness to die, you were set free from those sins.

Again, I would look to St. Paul to confirm what I'm saying, in this:

**21** 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 NIV)

How much clearer can it be? To be sin for us. Jesus identifies with sinners. Jesus is obedient to His father in this work. But in the lesson we have in Luke today, none of that other discussion is there. What we *do* have is a description of Jesus **praying** as he comes up out of the water. We know the context of the prayer, but we don't know what he prayed exactly. I would imagine Jesus' prayers would have something to do with protection as he begins his ministry. Holy people, truly holy people, don't die. Jesus is holy. But the wages of sin is death and Jesus has taken on our sins; I think from this point on Jesus is able to die because he carries the sins of the world on him. All we know for sure is that he **prayed** when he came up out of the water – and I think that **we should, too**.

Yesterday my wife and I finished moving our son out of our house and into his own condo. And as we finished and were getting ready to go out to eat to celebrate, my conscience told me we should pray. We should have a prayer of thanksgiving, I said; we should be grateful to God for this blessing and we should ask his blessing, ask his protection. It needed to be done; never mind that it felt awkward to do. But it *shouldn't* feel awkward. So I said we are going to have this prayer because it's good to do and because we are indeed grateful for what God has done. And I was able to bless my son. Finally, we should do it because *we're God's children*, and what do God's children do but *pray at all times and in all situations*. The more often we do it the less awkward it gets. *It is meet, right and salutary that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to you, Holy Father*. Those are the words from the liturgy. Maybe we ought to listen to them, live by them. Living your faith like it means something to you.

And that's where we can apply the lesson of Jesus' obedience.

Given what Jesus has done for us, taking our sins, setting us free from the consequences of sin and death, means we live **grateful** lives.

The other day I was reading an article about the times we're living in, in relation to the Vision Planning work we're doing as a congregation, and there's an idea here that there's a shift going on from Modernism to Postmodernism. According to the article, in this culture shift there is a decided lack of the expression of **gratitude** in any meaningful way. The spirit of this age is far more concerned with a sense of entitlement. And since we're entering a new year, I thought that it would be a good idea to include in our message some thoughts on the challenges we face

when witnessing to this new spirit, the spirit of the times we're living in. Attitudes are changing all around us and the reality is the institutions like the church are resistant to change. (Who wants change? Everybody. Who *wants* to change. Nobody. Resistance to change.)

I think this is actually a *good* thing that the church is resistant to change. It means we cannot easily change our doctrine or our practice – and we shouldn't! We have fundamental core values that we must never let go of and God's Word is the rock on which we stand, our sure foundation. That doesn't change. All other ground is sinking sand. And yet there is a truism we must acknowledge: Some things *have* to change. (Babies have to be changed.) There are some things that must be changed. One example of this may be the Apostle's Creed. The words are in English, brothers and sisters; they haven't changed over the centuries but the language has – we no longer say it in Latin; we no longer sing our liturgy in German; some things change. Before anything else, worship, for example, the attitude that worship is what attracts us – it's not, before anything else worship is a duty and a humble attitude we have toward God that is expressed in gratitude for what He has done for us. Style of worship is far down the list. There are a lot of ways of worship that can be expressed without lowering the standards.

Second, refining our mission and purpose. As it says in Proverbs, where there is no vision, the people perish. There needs to be vision, there needs to be hope. What are we here for. What is the purpose God has for us, as individuals, and as a congregation, as we struggle with our corporate identity.

Another challenge that faces today's churches, not ours in particular but Christian congregations as a whole, is visible stewardship. It's what we do with the resources God has given to us, in terms of our building, our people, our time, our treasure, our talent; using them in a God pleasing manner, always having to keep that in mind. This is a question of identity again, as we seek to serve God in His kingdom.

The fourth is a controversial one, social issues that Postmodernism has kind of "spun our moral compass" and had a wide influence not just on the culture but also within the church – in matters of identity: sexual, racial, political, whatever else there might be. There has always been a tension between those who would separate the life of the church from social issues and those who insist it belongs on the forefront of those social issues. There's a tension there between these two attitudes as we seek justice and an equitable society. But the current atmosphere surrounding social issues is unlike anything we've seen expressed in decades. It will require leadership and sensitivity on all sides of the question, not only from our leaders but from our members as well to be sensitive to the fears and thoughts and desires of others.

Finally, the future appears to be increasing in diversity of opinion and polarizing people into identity groups. You see it's all about identity and that's why it ties into the lesson today, of Jesus taking on our identity as sinners. This last point is about identity groups forcing us, sometimes, into hostile attitudes toward Christianity or at least towards God's church. This may actually have a positive effect – of bringing the whole church back together again, as the Christian church comes up against a society that no longer wants to listen to it or be influenced

by it. Denominations which had gone from being the one holy catholic church into many denominations may at this time come back together in unity as one holy catholic church, helping us see each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

*Christians have something to say about identity.* We do. We began today by confessing we are poor miserable sinners, but *redeemed by Christ*. That's a powerful identity. God tells us who we are; we're His redeemed people. And we face all kinds of challenges as individuals as well as as God's church but we do not face them alone. We have not only the Lord but also each other, the body of Christ.

Hear these words from Paul's words to the Galatians:

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. **2** Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. **3** If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. **4** Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else,

If there's anything about identity politics it's the idea of comparing one group against another.

Wait a second, a minute ago you said we should carry each other's burdens; now you're saying each one should carry their own load. Yes, the burdens you can help others carry, but there are burdens we must carry alone. We helped our son move the other day, and there were things we could carry and help him with, but he's going to have to carry the burden of living on his own. That's his. But he's *not* alone. Mom and Dad are still there. Brother is still there. And his God is still there. *So let's help carry each other's burdens and let the Lord carry us, too.* Share the hope that you have, the good things that you have learned from God.