

Dear fellow Baptized, may God’s grace, mercy, and peace be yours this day in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen. The title for today’s sermon is ‘An Epiphany’ and is from the Gospel, from Matthew chapter 3. Let us pray...Amen.

Today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, the day on which we remember the Baptism of our Lord Jesus in the Jordan. The season of Christmas is over, and the celebration of the birth of Christ, our Saviour, in Bethlehem has moved on and now the Epiphany season is upon us.

The word ‘Epiphany’ can be defined as ‘a moment of sudden revelation or insight’, an ‘aha’ moment or similar to a light being turned on, or Epiphany can be defined as a manifestation of a divine or supernatural being’. But, the season of Epiphany is something much more than that simple definition.

The Feast of the Epiphany of our Lord, on January 6th, begins the season of Epiphany 12 days after Christmas Day. Yet, unlike Christmas Day, Epiphany commemorates no event but presents an idea that assumes concrete form only through the facts of our Lord’s life. Instead of looking at a specific day it looks at specific things said and done by Jesus and about Jesus. The idea of Epiphany is the Christ who was born in Bethlehem is recognized by the world as God. The Light of the world has come and is shining into the darkness of all nations. At Christmas, God appears as man, and at Epiphany and through the season of Epiphany, this man appears before the world as God.

The idea that Christ became man needed no proof. He was clearly a human baby born in Bethlehem. But that this man, this helpless child, is God needed proof. So, through the season of Epiphany, the Church meditates on the divine nature of Christ as is apparent in Jesus life and teachings. This understanding is critically important because understanding Who Jesus is forms the foundation for our understanding of what Jesus has done. You could say Epiphany illuminates the reason for Lent and Easter. The manifestations of the Trinity, the signs and wonders performed by this man Jesus, and all His miracles have the purpose of proving to men that Jesus is God in the flesh, come for the salvation of you, and the world.

Now, in today’s reading we hear about Jesus going to the Jordan to be baptized by His cousin John the Baptist. John had been baptizing in the Jordan for a while. With crowds gathered John called for all to repent of their sins. John even called out the Pharisees and Sadducees for their unfaithfulness to God. John was proclaiming “**Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand**” because God called Him to prepare the way of the Lord! On top of preparing the way, John was also appointed to point out the Saviour of the world, the long promised Messiah. John was in place to point out God in the flesh, the One whose sandal he knew he was not worthy to carry.

Then the unthinkable happened to John. Something he was completely unprepared for happened and it absolutely floored him. Jesus, the holy, perfect, and sinless Son of God—God in the flesh—came to John to **BE** baptized. Had it been any other person, even Herod, Pilate, the chief priest or Caesar himself, anyone else, John would have called them to repent of their sins. But no one can call God to repent, for God has never sinned. Here, at the Jordan, the kingdom of God was no longer coming; Christ was there in the flesh seeking to be baptized. John clearly did

not understand this. John knew his place before Jesus, it was to be face down on the ground in humble adoration and worship, for that is the proper and only response acceptable for when you are before God. But here God, in Christ Jesus asks this sinful man to baptize Him.

John initially tried to refuse, saying “**I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?**” In John’s mind this is entirely wrong. But Jesus explains to John, “**Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.**” And John the Baptist fulfills his role and baptizes Jesus in the Jordan.

As soon as Jesus is baptized and comes out of the water the heavens literally come apart and open up. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove comes down on Jesus. God the Father proclaims for all to hear: “**This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.**” If there was any doubt, any confusion as to who this man Jesus was who had just been baptized, God the Father declares Jesus is God the Son.

But why did Jesus come and why was Jesus’ Baptism “**fitting to fulfill all righteousness?**” If Jesus was not a sinner, if He never sinned, why did He need to be baptized? How a Christian answers this question tends to reveal what they believe was Jesus’ primary purpose for coming to earth, and why He did so many of the things He did.

Now, there are some who say the reason for Jesus’ Baptism was to be an example for us to follow. They correctly note that Jesus Baptism marks the beginning of His earthly ministry, **BUT** say that the reason for Jesus Baptism was to encourage His disciples to follow His example. So, after Jesus’ resurrection three years later when He instituted Christian Baptism, it is thought that Jesus just did this to make a law, a new ordinance, for His disciples and followers to follow. Too often, many of the things Jesus did are seen in this way. Jesus’ ministry is boiled down to Him giving people good advice and rules to follow. Jesus death is largely viewed as something that should be a good example for us to follow as we live a life of self-sacrifice for and to God. This is the foundation of the creed: “What would Jesus do?”: Jesus as the ultimate Good example.

Yet, when one follows the “What would Jesus do?”, one also has to remember that flipping over tables and chasing people with a whip is within the realm of possibilities, as recorded in John chapter 2.

But the fact of the matter is that while Jesus did give really good wisdom, words of law, and while Jesus also gave a stellar example for us to **strive** to follow, the primary purpose Jesus came for was **NOT** to be another law giver. Jesus did not come to be an example for us to follow. In Paul’s words to Timothy: “**The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.**”(1 Timothy 1:15) Our problem was, along with all people, that “**we were dead in our trespasses and sins**”(Ephesians 2:1). You, and all people, were a spiritual corpse, a body without any life. People had already tried to keep the Law as given by Moses and they completely failed. How much more would each of us fail in attempting to be exactly like God’s perfect Son!

The answer for why Jesus needed to be baptized makes much more sense when you recognize the truth of the saving power of Baptism. The whole reason **Why** Jesus was baptized, **Why** Jesus took on our skin and bones, **Why** Jesus was born in Bethlehem, **Why** Jesus lived among us sinful people, **Why** Jesus taught and preached, **Why** Jesus died on the cross, and **Why** Jesus rose again, was, as the angel told Joseph “**you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins**”(Matthew 1:21). Jesus came to save you. Jesus told Zacchaeus “**For the Son of Man came to seek and to SAVE the lost.**”(Luke 19:10). Jesus also says “**For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.**”(John 3:17)

When Jesus was baptized, He did so to fulfill all righteousness. In being baptized, Jesus was identifying with us, and all sinners who stand condemned under the demands of God’s holy and perfect Law. By receiving Baptism, Jesus took our sins and burdens, and the sins and burdens of all humanity, onto His perfect and sinless body, and imparted His perfect righteousness into Baptismal waters. When Jesus died on the cross, all your sins, my sins, and the sins of the whole world, every single sin was crucified there with Him; they were done away with one and for all.

Everyone who receive Baptism in the name of Jesus becomes clothed with Christ’s own righteousness (Galatians 3:27). This is the glorious “great reversal” of our faith. Our sins become Jesus’, and His perfection and righteousness becomes ours. As Paul tells the Corinthians in his second letter: “**For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**”(2 Corinthians 5:51)

Jesus’ Baptism kicks off His public ministry of preaching and teaching, like the anointing of a prophet or king. It also shows Jesus humility in His association with sinners. But the most important, and primary reason He came and everything Jesus did, everything, was for us and our salvation. Baptism is not a work of the Law; rather it is God’s work of salvation in us. Baptism is NOT your work nor is it mine; Baptism is entirely God’s own work and action. Our actions do not make Baptism what it is, God and His Word does. Even faith does not make or validate Baptism; rather faith simply trusts God’s Word and receives the gifts of Baptism. Baptism is God’s divine gift, pure and simple, beginning and ending with Christ. In the words of St. Paul to the Romans: “**Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.**”(Romans 4:4) If you contribute something to Baptism, if Baptism is dependent on you, your actions, and work, it cannot be called a gift but a reward.

But Baptism is a gift, received by faith. In Baptism God joins His life giving Word with ordinary water. The result is Baptism works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the Word and promise of God declare. Paul tells Titus, and us, “**God saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.**”(Titus 3:5-7)

Being baptized with water “signifies that the old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God’s presence.”(Small Catechism: IV) Here we live in that tension of being fully saint and fully sinner. In the waters of Baptism we died to sin and are raised to new life in Christ Jesus. We have life in Christ because of our Baptism, and we daily return to it with the gifts it promises. You are no longer spiritually dead; you have eternal life in Christ. The Holy Spirit continues this work in you as you hear God’s Word, read, meditate, and pray it. It also works as Christ invites you to His supper to feed on His body and blood for the forgiveness of all your sins. Here in Word and Sacrament Christ comes to you to carry you in Himself.

The reason Christ came, why He was baptized, and why He died and rose was to save you. Rejoice in the forgiveness, deliverance, and salvation God has poured out on you, and which He continues to pour out on you this day and every day. Amen.

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