

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

At the center of our worship today is a celebration of the Baptism of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And we hear about our Lord's Baptism within this very brief passage from the Gospel according to Matthew. While this passage does not give us a whole lot to go on as far as details of the physical picture of what is taking place, however, this passage affords us an opportunity to look beyond the physical nature of Baptism and look deeper into the essence of what is going on in this brief passage. And when we do so, we may just find that the passage takes us beyond this Baptism itself and allows us to ask, is this passage about Baptism or is this passage about something else.

So, as we reflect on Baptism may we remember that as Lutherans, Baptism is instituted by God. And to be Baptized in God's name is to be Baptized NOT by human beings but by God Himself according to Luther in the Large Catechism. Although Baptism is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God's own act. And through Baptism we are received into a Christian community.¹ St. Peter reminds us in his first epistle that as Baptized Christians, we are a:

...chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.
(1 Peter 2:9)

As we reflect on our Baptism, we might recall that in the Gospel of Mark, it seems that Jesus is still dripping wet from his Baptism and the Holy Spirit "*immediately*" drives him into the wilderness for forty Days. While we may not be dripping wet, our Baptism drives us into the wilderness of sorts when Christ himself commissions us all in his final instruction to his apostles before his ascension:

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
(Matthew 28:18)

Yes, I believe it's nice to think of ourselves as God's chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, or God's own people...and it's pleasing to be commissioned to Baptize and make disciples, but is this the intent of this brief passage that is before us today? In this scene there is no crowd, no Pharisees or Sadducees complaining, or no disciples...just John, Jesus, and the voice of God.

This brief passage today may allow us to reflect on our own Baptism and what that means for us, however, within the succinct nature of this passage we are being directed to focus on John, Jesus, and the voice of God to see that there is more to this passage and more to Baptism itself.

This passage is brief and placed into our lectionary on the first Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord where we celebrate and focus our attention on the manifestation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ and who Jesus is. If there was any doubt about who Jesus is, we have a voice today...a voice from heaven saying to us all, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

¹ Kolb, Robert ; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, from the fourth part of the "Large Catechism," concerning Baptism, pages 456-457, par 2, 6, & 10.

(Matt 3:17) Today, in this season of Epiphany, God does not say, “You are my Son” as Mark and Luke have recorded this event in their Gospels, nor do we have John the Baptist testifying that this is the Son of God as we do in the Gospel of John. No today we have the voice from heaven, or God telling all in the third person, *THIS*...this person being Baptized is my Son. In this passage today, God is not speaking directly to Jesus as God does in Mark and Luke when God says, *YOU are my Son*. Today in this season of Epiphany the revelation of Jesus Christ is certain and confirmed with these very words from God...“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” And what’s more, we see the true meaning and the true essence of this passage being obediently carried out by Jesus when he says to John:

“Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Both Jesus and John fulfill all righteousness in this act of Baptism. “Fulfilling all righteousness” according to this Gospel literally means, doing the revealed will of God. Here is Jesus and John being obedient and doing the will of God which is revealed to us by John Baptizing Jesus. And through our own Baptism, we too are called into that same righteousness by doing the revealed will of God. Then as God’s chosen race, God’s royal priesthood, or God’s holy nation, we attempt to do the revealed will of God. However, do we end up doing the *revealed will* of God or do we do the *assumed will* of God?

In this brief passage we see both John and Jesus doing the will of God. Every week we gather here in this place to worship and pray and we use the very words our Lord taught us in the Lord’s Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name, *thy kingdom come,*
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

I think when we pray these words we truly pray for God’s will to be done...but I believe in our attempts to do the will of God, we all end up doing what we assume God’s will to be. Looking at all that is taking place in our culture today I can say with the utmost confidence that we are merely doing the assumed will of God. And what I mean by this is that we over look our own shortcomings and sins by judging the world around us and set the “righteousness-bar” accordingly. We then *assume* that our own good intentions, our judgment of others, and our good deeds are God’s will that will separate us from “THEM”. We then assume we have earned God’s mercy and forgiveness and hold fast to it and use it as a weapon to threaten and terrorize others with. However, as we assume the will of God, Jesus reveals God’s will in his Sermon on the Mount:

⁴³ ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” ⁴⁴ But I say to you, (*here is the will of God*)² Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? (Matthew 5:43-47a)

² Italicized parenthetical words are added to emphasize God’s will found within the Sermon on the Mount.

This is the revealed will of God that does not separate us or protect us, it gathers us and unites us. In the birth of Christ, we see the vulnerability of the presence of God among us. This vulnerability is sustained in the Gospel of Mark when Jesus is immediately driven out to the wilderness after His Baptism. Jesus is was not protected or cloistered, he is not protected by the sheer power of God, rather the manifestation of God among us, our Emmanuel, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is united with us by taking on our sin...becomes like us in the waters of Baptism by drowning those sins in the waters of Baptism, and then takes them to the cross.

In this Baptism, we see the presence of God among us, identifying Himself with us. The very presence of God is among us even now in this proclaimed Word and in this Holy Meal. From the start of his life and throughout his life, Jesus lived in the midst of his enemies and did God's will by being obedient to God, even to giving his life on the cross. And as he is dying on the cross, all his disciples deserted him. On the cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evildoers and mockers. And we see in this that Jesus is doing the will of God, especially as he cries for us by saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing," (Luke 23:34).³ Jesus does not *assume God's will* by crying out about the injustice bestowed upon him, he cries out for mercy for all who have put him on the cross. Jesus does not cry out about the injustice we do... rather, Jesus cries out in the mercy of forgiveness showing us all the will of God.

In this Baptism today that is before us we see the very voice of God declaring to us that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. In the fulfillment of righteousness, we see Jesus who John the Baptist proclaims to be the "might one of God" submitting to John who is the lesser one Baptizing him. Today in this Baptism, we see the very Son of God fulfilling all righteousness by showing obedience to God. We see that righteousness is not fulfilled by a powerful and authoritative king stepping on others to justify himself, rather we see a servant in whom God delights, in whom God sets His Spirit upon, being obedient to that will of God that opens the heavens for us all. And while Matthew may understand righteousness as obedience to God, keep in mind that, because righteousness is fulfilled or complete by Jesus, for us righteousness is not a human accomplishment for our merits...righteousness is the redeeming righteousness, which comes as a pure gift from God through the waters of Baptism. In the waters of Baptism is the power of God poured over us for our salvation.⁴

In and through the waters of Baptism is God's will for us here on earth...it is a will that knows no partiality. In and through the waters of Baptism is our forgiveness, our grace, and our salvation. In the waters of Baptism we are freely given, a pure gift from God that is our portion of the righteousness through God's only Son, Jesus Christ...here in these waters and through these waters is the kingdom of God breaking into our lives, in these waters is the reconciliation of God's relationship with us all. In the waters of Baptism the heavens are open and God claims us and makes us His own and promises us all that we shall be saved and have eternal life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

³ To explain that Jesus was not protected or cloistered in safety I referred to Detrick Bonhoeffer's reference to Martin Luther in his Book, *Life Together, A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Pub, 1954. Taken from the discussion in Chapter One on Community page 17.

⁴ Van Harn, Roger E.. *The Lectionary Commentary Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings: Gospels*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001. The commentary based on the appointed Gospel reading for the First Sunday after the Epiphany (Baptism of our Lord), Year A Matthew 3:13-17. Not a direct quote but much of the same thought. Page 16.