

Baptism of Our Lord  
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*Scriptures: Isaiah 42:1–9, Psalm 29, Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 3:13-17*

There are a number of interesting questions surrounding the gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism, questions that date from the earliest Christian communities. In fact, given the various reworkings of the story by the four evangelists, it's likely the very existence of this account was troubling. Why, to summarize the early church's difficulty, did Jesus need to be baptized by John at all? Surely it wasn't for the forgiveness of sin? Or because John was the greater prophet or teacher? Then why?

One begins to take a clue by what happens immediately after Jesus is baptized. The heavens are opened, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus and a voice from heaven is heard saying "This is my Son." I imagine that must have startled all those present. I mean, the usage of third person pronouns seem to indicate that the voice is addressing not Jesus but the crowd. "This is my Son. With [him] I'm well pleased." This passage is one of those rare instances where you have a very clear Trinitarian formula: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They interact. They are working in unison. And what seems more important, God is being revealed. God is revealed in the voice, in the dove, and in Jesus. This is precisely, I think, what becomes core and so very significant in this passage: God's revelation. It is no coincidence that the Baptism of Jesus is celebrated at the beginning of the season of Epiphany because this is an act of showing who Jesus is. As we said last week, the message is really simple but also gravely important. This one you are seeing, Jesus, is God which is significant because that's what sets into motion what God has in mind for humanity.

This is one of those critical moments. This is a peak event. Sometimes we are able to point to the decisive events in life. For a physician, the decisive events probably include his or her licensing to be a medical doctor and taking of the solemn medical vows. For a pastor, it is the rite of Ordination to the Holy Ministry of the Church. For a husband, for a wife, it is the solemn vows of marriage. For a military person or a political representative, it is the commissioning and swearing into office. For a Christian, it is Baptism. It is where it all begins. It is the moment when the path is revealed. It is the decisive moment when one is sent forward as a different person. It doesn't matter if you are conscious about it. It is not dependent on your knowledge about it. As we all know, salvation does not depend on the choice of the person but on God's grace.

Jesus' baptism is not different to that. When he got water poured over his head, he got committed to a certain path in his life. One that was planned for him, but also one that he accepted out of his own will. There was a role to be fulfilled and a mission to be satisfied. For ages past, there had been a prophecy from Isaiah that one day, the God of Israel would raise up on earth a special servant in whom his soul would delight. God would uphold this servant. God would put his Spirit upon him. God would launch him out on earth to bring forth justice to the nations.

And this is where this story of Jesus' baptism intersects with the stories of our own. For we, too, can only live into the mission that God has set for us to the degree that we hear and believe the good news that we, too, are beloved children of God. As with Jesus, we discover in baptism *who* we are by hearing definitively *whose* we are. Baptism is nothing less than the promise that we are God's beloved children. That no matter where we go, God will be with us. That no matter what we may do, God is for us and will not abandon us. In baptism we are blessed with the promise of God's Spirit and given a name, and that name is Christian, one marked with the cross of Christ and named a beloved child of God forever. We discover our identity.

But there's more. Not only do we learn in our baptism what our name is and who we belong to, we also learn what we are here for. Just like with his baptism Jesus initiated his mission to the world, so we too are sent from the baptismal font to do something. We all have a ministry and that ministry is not too different from the one Jesus had. We can't just remain as passive spectators of God's salvation; we have to live out our salvation. Because we've been saved, because we've been marked with the cross of Christ, because we've been drowned in the waters to be raised to a new life, we are then called to live out like that. What becomes important is that we remember the appropriate order of things. We are able to do this mission of proclaiming God's love because God has acted upon us first. That's why we say it all initiates in baptism. It all begins at the time and place when we are claimed as God's. It is from that instance that we are called and equipped for our ministry.

And now, rightly so, you may be wondering what kind of ministry we might be doing. When we talk about ministry we are not necessarily referring to preachers or prophets, although those are included too. For most of us ministry means to live out our Christian vocation through our daily lives. The vocation of a Christian is to be dedicated, in whatever capacity, to the neighbor's needs. We are called to strive for a safer, peaceful world where there's justice for each one and where life can thrive. Those are not necessarily big words although is very important. We don't have to earn a Noble Prize, but we have to be the best we can at what we do. We live out our Christian mission when we live out our vocation as nurses, or accountants, or farmers, or lawyers, or students, or workers, or housewives, or whatever other capacity we may have. It's all given so that we can put to use for the benefit of others.

Two things that Martin Luther used to say are important today. "Whenever you wash your face, remember your baptism." That's another way of saying whenever you clean your body remember that God has cleaned up your life first. The second one comes as a consequence of the first. "God doesn't want a cobbler who puts crosses on shoes. He wants a cobbler who makes good shoes." Luther's point with this second quote is that when we do our work well, with a good attitude, we are living out our mission and our vocation. In the same way that even the humble cobbler can live out his vocation, each one of us is called to do whatever we do in the best way we can, always with our neighbor's benefit in mind. That's what vocation is all about and that's what we are sent to do in our baptisms. Jesus was baptized as way of signaling both where he had come from and for what he was sent. In the same way, when we remember our baptisms we remember that we have come from God and we have been sent to live out God's love for others in our very lives. May God help us to daily live out our baptismal vocation. Amen.