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The Baptism of Our Lord  
January 8, 2012  
Text: Mark 1:4–11

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Today marks a significant milestone in our continuing commemoration of the life and deeds of the Lord Jesus Christ. Over the past 3 weeks, our attention has focused upon the Lord Jesus as an infant and toddler. Now, the Lord is now an adult.

The gospel writer, Mark, skips all the niceties of Jesus' birth. No angels, no shepherds, no wise men from the east. He doesn't even begin with "in the beginning" like John's gospel. No, he starts with John the Baptist preaching the gospel and baptizing sinners in the Jordan River. While Matthew and Luke use the remarkable events surrounding Jesus' birth to demonstrate that He is the holy Son of God, Mark uses Jesus' baptism to teach it.

Two events happen to reveal who Jesus is. The first is found in vs. 10 of today's gospel reading. Jesus comes up out of the waters of His baptism and immediately the Holy Spirit descends upon Him like a dove. The same Holy Spirit that hovered over the face of the waters in the early days of creation (Gen. 1:2) hovers over Jesus as He stands in the waters of the Jordan.

In Mark's gospel everything is clear and crisp. Jesus is baptized. Because of this anointing of water, the Holy Spirit is given to Him. Simple and profound. What happens to Jesus in His baptism has a profound effect upon our understanding of what happens when people are baptized. The Holy Spirit is immediately given when the water is applied to people in God's Trinitarian name. The Holy Spirit descended upon you when you were baptized. That in itself makes remembering our baptism all the more joyous and beneficial.

The second thing revealed in today's gospel reading is found in vs. 11. An audible voice rings for from heaven declaring Jesus to be well the pleasing Son of the Father. The same voice that called the universe into existence in Genesis 1 now speaks to declare who this man Jesus is – my beloved Son. This too has profound implications as to what happens in your baptism. When baptized in God's name, you become the well-pleasing, much beloved child of God the Father.

Jesus' baptism reveals who He is – the beloved, well-pleasing Son of the Father. Yet, Mark uses our Lord's baptism to unveil the work given to Jesus by His heavenly Father. To see this, we must look to the baptism John the Baptist was offering to everyone in the Jordan River.

Look at vs. 4, “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John’s baptism and his preaching fit hand in glove with beautiful simplicity. Preaching about the forgiveness of sins led to baptism, baptism lead to more preaching about forgiveness.

Then Mark tells us who went out to receive such preaching and baptizing. Vs. 5, “And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” The common thread between John’s preaching and the baptism he offers is sin. Without recognizing that John’s preaching and baptism addresses the problem of sin is to not understand the mission and ministry of the Lord Jesus.

John administered a baptism that prepares sinners to stand before God Almighty without shame, fear or dread. Only those who need to confess and be washed of their sins need come to the Jordan for cleansing. This was a baptism for sinners needing repentance and forgiveness.

The marvel in Mark 1 is Jesus isn’t a sinner and He needs no repentance. There are no sins to forgive with Jesus. But our Lord is baptized with a sinner’s baptism thus joining Himself to sinful humans. This is why Jesus is pleasing to His heavenly Father, and why the Father sends the Holy Spirit to rest upon Him. Jesus joins in solidarity with sinners, taking their place so that they might be saved from the devil’s condemnation. Jesus came to John’s baptism to take on the world’s sins. For taking upon Himself this work in faithfulness and obedience, the Father is well pleased.

What begins at the River Jordan is completed some three years later in Jerusalem in Good Friday and Easter. The Lord does not despise a baptism meant for sinners (Mark 1) nor does He refuse a sinner’s death on the cross (Mark 15).

Such is the radical love God has for us. He didn’t wait for us to ask Him. Jesus took the initiative and did what it takes to save a lost world. If Jesus is to give the Holy Spirit to forgiven sinners, He must receive the Holy Spirit and take the sins of all sinners unto Himself. This work of salvation Jesus receives in a moment of time. And the Father is well pleased because of it. All this Mark tells us in 8 verses!!

Jesus’ baptism marks Him as the One who would die for our sins and who would give the Holy Spirit; our Baptism marks us as those who have died to our sins and live in the power of the Spirit. This is the connection that St. Paul marvelously declares in Romans chapter 6:3–4, “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.”

Mark 1 and Romans 6 describe in different ways the Biblical teaching of Justification. Or to put it differently, what we so often mean by the “gospel of Jesus Christ” is really the same as God’s justification of the sinner. Over the past couple of weeks, I’ve emphasized this most important truth to our catechism students. I have given them this definition and am asking them to learn it by heart. My goal and prayer is that they will know, for the rest of their lives, what the saving gospel of Jesus Christ is:

Justification (gospel) means sinners are saved (forgiven, born again, redeemed) by grace (gift) through faith (trust) in Jesus (life, death, and resurrection).

Jesus entered the Jordan River that He might justify sinners by His own perfect life, obedient death, and triumphant resurrection from the dead. Jesus is baptized that He might sanctify our baptism in God’s holy name. Jesus didn’t need to be baptized. But we needed Him to be baptized for our sakes. Mark begins His telling of Jesus justifying life with His baptism in the Jordan. This tale of love and grace will reach its pinnacle on Good Friday and Easter when Jesus takes the sins of every sinner to Calvary.

The baptism of our Lord Jesus proclaims the Lord isn’t afraid or ashamed to unite Himself to sinners. Instead, He justifies them. Jesus will not cast you aside or discard His redeemed children, not when things seem good or when they seem to be falling apart. Every day for Christians is living out God the Father’s gracious gift of justification for we constantly walk in the power of that gift. We are forgiven. Our minds are forever being renewed by the Holy Spirit given to us in Baptism. The affections of our heart and soul are moment by moment being reshaped in conformity with the heart of Jesus. We are a new creation, old things have passed away. The newness of Christ’s resurrection life fills us so that we consider ourselves “dead to sin and alive to God” (Rom. 6:11). In other words, we are justified before God and declared to be His beloved, well-pleasing children. This is the Gospel in which we stand, now and into eternity.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.