

Pastor Lew Upchurch
January 12, 2020

The Baptism of our Lord
Matthew 3:13-17

“The Lord’s Way”

“But John tried to prevent him, saying “I need to be baptized by you. But Jesus answered him, “allow it now” (Matt. 3:14-15).

One of the highlights of the year for my family is the annual dinner/party we attend in honor of 3 of our kid’s baptismal birthdays. It’s hosted by their Godparents, and I have to tell you...it’s awesome! When they stood at the font with my wife and me, and promised to support our children in prayer, help them grow in the Christian faith, and live in their baptismal covenant, they meant it! And this event, which they have hosted for so many years, reminds me of this every time we get together. There’s always a wonderful dinner with amazing desserts. There are baptismal birthday gifts. There is prayer and even a time of reflection, in which we all participate, that focuses on the significance of the sacrament. It’s such a special time for all of us.

The 2019 fiesta was just a couple of weeks ago. And yes, I meant to say fiesta, because it was a true religious feast complete with taco’s, Sangria, balloons, and a big sign hanging in the dining room with the words *Feliz Bautismo*. But no matter the theme, or the meal, or the gifts, we gather together to remember and to celebrate that in baptism, we are alive to God in Christ Jesus!

And that’s just what we are doing today (minus the tacos, of course). We are recalling our own baptisms. We are renewing our baptismal vows. We are celebrating the wondrous gifts we receive through this means of grace. But is this all that we’re celebrating? Our baptisms are certainly part of it, but this great festival in the church is called the Baptism of our Lord. So, really, this day is first and foremost about *his* baptism. So, we have to kind of slow down and make that connection first— to his baptism— before linking it with ours.

But this is challenging for us, to say the least, isn’t it? Because unlike the big ones like Christmas and Easter, it’s really hard to feel involved in this event. After all, Jesus’ baptism wasn’t the same as ours. He wasn’t baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. He wasn’t forgiven of his sins and made a child of God. He was God! But still, Jesus was baptized by his cousin John. And we really don’t understand why.

Of course, we know how the story unfolds. John is who Matthew records earlier in chapter 3 as the one who came preaching, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* The one who great numbers of people from Jerusalem and

the surrounding region were going down to the Jordan River, confessing their sins, and receiving his baptism of repentance. But John was only preparing the way. He knew that. Because right there at the river he says, *“He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”* But as our gospel reading today begins, that man, Jesus, came to the Jordan to be baptized by John. Of course, John didn’t get it. He’s like, “What are you talking about? You have nothing to repent of. I’m the sinner here. I need to be baptized by you!”

If we’re honest, we don’t get this either. That’s why I think we’ve all been kind of trained to just give John a big “Bless your heart,” and move on. I’m serious. “Oh, Johnny boy, we know you have your views about Jesus. But you of all people should know that he has to get in that River with all of us and take our place. Bless your heart.”

But we’re looking at this scene from the other side. John is there and he obviously sees it better than we do. In fact, he sees the way things actually are. And what he sees should make the Baptism of our Lord even harder for us to grasp. Because, think about this. John is a prophet, so he looks at the world and all that’s in it through those eyes. And what does he see? His own sin, for starters. The “vipers” who are the religious leaders of his people. The “church going folks” repenting of their sins one day, but then forgetting all about it the next, living the same rebellious lives. John sees the world as it is...broken and stained with filth.

What do we see the world? We don’t have to be prophets to see all the rebellion against God. or to hear the loud voices of all the evil that’s out there. We know it all too well in our own lives and families. In our own community and our nation. We might try to stay positive. But on a daily basis, this life can be so hard, and so disappointing. Because what we see and what we hear is all the brokenness; the hatred; the filth of people just doing “whatever feels good,” regardless of what God has to say about it. And all too often, we’re the ones leading the way.

So, I guess we’re not that different from John after all, are we? But again, we’re on the other side. But he’s right there. And the one thing that’s clear is that God needs to do something! And what is even more clear is that he has promised that he would do something. John knew that! He knew the Scriptures. He knew the great hope of his people! But most important of all, John knew that God did do something. In Christ, he came into his broken creation to fix it. But like this? I imagine John thinking, “the water is filled with sin and sinners, and all Jesus is going to do is go down into that?”

John had to have been so troubled by all of this because he could see that if Jesus gets baptized, nothing changes. Sin and evil will still have the loudest voices. The world, and the people in it, will still be messed up and dying! But then Jesus speaks. *“John, let it be so now.”* “Allow it to happen. I know that it’s hard, and I know it doesn’t look right. But I know this whole evil thing better than you. And this is the Father’s way. I know you don’t understand it, but allow me to go down with the sinners, and stand with them. Because I’m going to win, but it’s not how you think. By going down into that water clean, and coming up filthy, it will be the beginning of giving up my life, so that you, and all people, can live.” And what does John do? He consented. He did what Jesus asked and wow! The heavens opened, the Spirit of God descended, and the Father spoke, *“This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.”*

Amazing isn’t it? God way to deal with all the sin in this world is the opposite of what we think. And many more times, it’s the opposite of what we want. But this is his way. Our Lord conquering our sin, first by going down into it, and then by carrying it all to the cross, where he suffered for it and died. But his way wasn’t finished. Now, our resurrected and ascended Lord, says “Because of all that I did, not for my sake, but for yours, not, “I baptize you in my name.” I call you my own. I forgive your sins. I grant you the gift of faith in me that leads to life and life everlasting.

None of us deserve it. None of us can earn it. But it’s his way. So what do we do now? Believe it. And trust it. Look, I know how forgiveness doesn’t really do it for us as it should. Because, on this side of Jesus’ baptism, and even our own, we still fall into the trap of expecting more from what the world seems to offer than what the Savior does. But make no mistake. Without him, life is dirty and bad, no matter how much we deny that it is. And when that reality stares us in the face and convicts us—whether it’s today, tomorrow, or even months or years from now, there is Christ proclaiming the promise. *All of us who have been baptized into Him were baptized into his death and resurrection by the glory of the Father, so that we too might walk in newness of life.* And once again, through the same Spirit who descended on Jesus in the Jordan, and on us at the font, we get it. And we’re thankful. And we celebrate. Because it’s the Lord’s way.
Amen.