

Epiphany II Sermon January 17, 2021

And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan.

**In the name of the Father, and, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.**

This morning we celebrate the second manifestation in our Epiphany trilogy, the Baptism of Our Lord. Our brethren in the Eastern Orthodox Church celebrate the Baptism of Jesus on January 6, with a three day celebration. For Roman Catholics, last Sunday commemorated this event, and this morning we have the Baptism story as recorded by Saint Mark.

In the midst of all of the Holy Days following Christmastide and as we focus more attention on the visit of the Magi on Epiphany, this important event in the life of our Lord doesn't always get the attention it deserves. But it does have a place of prominence on our Kalendar.

In fact, the Feast of Our Lord's Baptism was celebrated some 300 years before Christmas was ever declared a Holy Day.

But many will ask, why do we even recall this event? After all, did Jesus "really" need to be baptized? Isn't baptism just for sinful human beings that need to be cleansed?

Well, no. Jesus certainly didn't have to be baptized. He could not adhere to John's admonition to repent, because he was sinless. He had nothing to repent of. Thus, the act of baptism, the washing away of sin, did not have the same meaning for him as it did for John's disciples.

But our Lord wanted to be as close to us as possible. After all, He left the heights of heaven coming to earth as a man. As he begins his public ministry, it seems appropriate that he approaches the one who has been preparing the way for him. In looking at why Our Lord sought baptism, it seems there are several reasons:

First, Our Lord's Baptism was a sign of his complete and total dedication to following the will of God the Father. For all others coming to John for baptism, this required a change in direction, hence, a call to repent. But Our Lord's Baptism was simply a public declaration of his love of God and an example of perfect obedience.

Do you recall the words of our Lord just a few years later as he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane? "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will but thy will be done."

It was the ultimate submission to the Father's will; to reconcile us to the Father. And baptism was a public declaration of that submission.

Next, the Baptism of Jesus was an announcement of his public ministry. Both God the Father and John the Baptist confirmed Jesus' unique calling publicly, thus, his baptism was a consecration for ministry.

And finally, Our Lord's Baptism was an example to us. After teaching that Baptism was necessary, what better example to follow than the man himself. Remember the words of the Great Commission:

"Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Although he didn't have to, Jesus did the same things humans did in order to fulfill all righteousness. Fulfilling all righteousness means thinking, and saying, and doing everything that is consistent with being in a right relationship with God.

And just as God was well-pleased with his beloved Son, he is likewise pleased with his adopted sons and daughters as we enter the waters of baptism.

Indeed, baptism reveals that we are God's beloved children. And God is pleased with his children when we behave in ways consistent with

whose children we are, that is, when our doing matches our being, in other words, “righteousness.”

And be careful not to confuse righteousness with self-righteousness.

We need only look to the Pharisees as an example of how not to act.

The Pharisees thought that one earned the right to be proud of their behavior, and therefore could look down on those that did not behave like them.

But Our Lord taught and showed by example; by his behavior and attitude that true righteousness is of God because of who He is, and not because of what we do.

Unlike our Lord, baptism is necessary for each and every one of us. If we are to live as righteous men and women, we need the grace of God that only baptism can bestow.

In the opening words in the Rite of Baptism, the priest prays, “I beseech you to call upon God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that of his bounteous mercy, he will grant to this person, that, which by nature he cannot have.”

And there you have it. By our nature we are limited; by our nature we are unable to do the things God asks.

But listen to the prayer that follows. After admitting that we are bad by nature, the solution is clear:

“We pray that this person may receive remission of sin by spiritual regeneration.”

For Jesus, baptism was symbolic, for you and I, necessary for our very salvation.

The last comment we’ll make on our Gospel this morning is what occurs immediately after our Lord’s Baptism. St. Mark writes, “And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him; and there came a voice from heaven saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

Two notes here: First, these words and the image they portray gives us a clear revelation of the Trinity. We have the voice of God, the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, and Jesus present as the human servant. All are there simultaneously.

The second point, and central to our study today, is God’s affirmation: This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.

Every human being needs to be affirmed, and so did Jesus. And remember, your baptism is not a one time affirmation that slowly

decreases, rather, it is an all time affirmation that continues to grow through God's grace.

As a result of this grace, we are empowered to do things we otherwise neither could nor would do, including the bigger challenges such as loving and forgiving those we'd really rather not.

This is why we normally dip our fingers into the water and bless ourselves upon entering the church or getting sprinkled at Easter with the water blessed at the Vigil. These remind us of that great sacrament of initiation that changed our very nature.

Just as God affirmed his Son at Baptism, his affirmation of us tells us that we are his children adopted by grace. Without that affirmation, the assurance from an infallible, all knowing, all loving source, we could be nothing and do nothing worthwhile. By God's affirmation we know that "who" we are is really "whose" we are.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Amen.