

The Baptism of Our Lord
January 13, 2019
Luke 3:15-22
“Wheat or Chaff?”

What in the world is Jesus doing? Clearly, He’s getting baptized. But why? This baptism that John preaches is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It’s for sinners, amply demonstrated by the crowds that listen to John and enter the river. They’ve gathered to hear John preach about the Christ, the long-promised Messiah. Some have even speculated that John is the Savior: after all, he’s the one who’s doing the baptizing, not being baptized. But John puts this rumor to rest, saying, “I baptize you with water, but He who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.” So John is not the Messiah—he’s only the messenger sent to prepare the way for the greater One. Then Jesus arrives on-scene, and John is quick to show Him deference, to declare to the crowds, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” The greater One has arrived...and what does He do? He goes down into the river to be baptized. Just like all the other people. Just like all the sinful people. If this Jesus is the greater One, the long-awaited Christ, why is He getting baptized like all the sinners around Him?

The reason should take your breath away. It’s food for meditation and wonder. Jesus is baptized with all those sinners because He has come to be one of them. The Son of God hasn’t come to beat the stuffing out of them for their sin. He hasn’t sent John ahead to soften them up with calls to repentance before He rides in and really drops the hammer. He’s not there to be the Judge who sends them away. He has come to be the One sentenced for their sin.

John didn’t say, “Behold the wrath of God incarnate!” He said, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.”

That’s why Jesus is being baptized. This baptism is for sinners, and Jesus has come to take the place of sinners. It’s not that He was still figuring out what direction to take for the first thirty years of His incarnate life, whether or not to really be the Savior, but make no mistake: this baptism seals His fate, confirms that His destination is the cross. As we sing in one of our Epiphany hymns, at His baptism the sinless Jesus sanctifies the water: after all those sinners getting baptized, the water is pretty filthy with sin. How does Jesus cleanse the water? He takes up all those sins and bears them Himself. They’ve all been washed onto Him. He’s going to bear them all to the cross.

This isn’t the Son going rogue on the Father. This is His Father’s will, and the Father provides the proof. As Jesus prays, the heavens open. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in bodily form, like a dove, and the Father declares from heaven, “You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased.” Father and Spirit are there, standing in solidarity with the Son. This plan of salvation is the will of the triune God.

This is the first baptism of Jesus. There's one left. Later on in Luke 12:50, Jesus declares, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!" He is speaking of the cross, where He will suffer the final judgment for all the sins He's borne from His baptism in the Jordan. That will be, if you will, His baptism by fire as He suffers hell for the sins of the world—suffers in the place of sinners who deserve the condemnation. His baptism in the Jordan leads directly to this baptism of suffering: at the first He takes His place with sinners, and at the second He dies for their sin. The unquenchable fire of God's wrath burns away all the chaff of sin on the cross. When it is finished, all that is left is the good harvest.

This explains John's prophecy of Jesus to the crowds: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." This is true for you as well: The Lord has baptized you with the Holy Spirit and with fire, and our epistle from Romans 6:3-4 explains: "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." Your baptism was far, far more than a ceremony that happened a while ago. In that sacrament, the Lord joined you to His death and resurrection. On the cross, He died for you; at your baptism, He joined you to that death so that you died with Him. On the cross, He suffered God's judgment for sin; at your baptism, He joined you to His death so that you don't have to die a separate death for sin yourself. You couldn't die for your sin and rise again: you'd just be dead, and dead forever. Jesus died for your sin, and then He did rise again; and by water and the Word, He has joined you to His dying and rising so that you might have eternal life with Him.

All of this happens because of Jesus, because of His baptism in the Jordan and His baptism on the cross: At your baptism, your sins were washed off of you; at His baptism, your sins were washed onto Him. On the cross, Christ suffered for your sin in your place; at your baptism, He gives you the credit for that suffering, gives you the grace and pardon He has won. At His baptism in the Jordan, Jesus received the Holy Spirit from the Father to be Your Savior; at your baptism, you received the Holy Spirit as He saved you by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, which He shed on you abundantly through Jesus Christ, your Savior; that being justified by His grace, you should be made an heir according to the hope of eternal life. On the cross, Jesus suffered that baptism of unquenchable fire that purifies, refines and destroys sin; at your Baptism, He cleansed you of sin, and declares that you are now pure and holy in His sight. Thus He has joined you to the baptism of fire He suffered in your place. At His baptism in the Jordan, God the Father declared, "You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased" as Jesus took His place with sinners to be their Savior on the cross. At your baptism, God the Father declared, "For Jesus' sake, you are My beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." Not that you are now divine or only-begotten of God, but that you are now an heir of heaven for the sake of Jesus.

You really can't separate Jesus' baptism in the Jordan from His death on the cross: both are vital, interwoven parts of God's plan for your salvation. They are joined together. Likewise, in your baptism you have been joined to Christ in His death and His resurrection. His death is your death, so you don't have to die for your sin. His life is your life, so that you will live forever.

Dear friends, this isn't just something that happened in the past that holds promise for the future. This defines your life and offers great comfort to you as a Christian even now.

In the language of our text, the most important question that confronts you this day is this: are you wheat or are you chaff? Of the final Judgment, our text declares that the Lord's "winnowing fork is in His hand, to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire." So if the Lord considers you "wheat," you have eternal life; but if He considers you "chaff," only eternal judgment awaits. So, are you wheat or are you chaff?

Now, for me, it's a bit hard to identify myself with grain, so I'd like to pose the question again with other language from our text: are you a beloved son of God or not? If you are, the kingdom of heaven is yours. If you're not, then all that is left for you is hell. So are you a beloved son or not? (We'd better clarify: this is not "son" as opposed to "daughter," but "son" as opposed to "slave." Male or female, you are all sons in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26)—because the sons are the heirs of the kingdom.)

So are you a beloved son or not? And how do you know for sure? This is how. Imagine a family with a couple of kids. Why are the kids in the family? Because they were born into the family. They didn't submit a resume or sign a contract: they're in the family because they've been brought in without them doing a thing. Now, they're kids. Kids have good days and sometimes have bad days. On the good days, they're rewarded; on the bad days, they're disciplined. That's how families work. So here's the question: on which days are the kids part of the family—the good days or the bad? The answer, of course, is both. They're not part of the family because of their behavior: they're often part of the family in spite of their behavior! They're part of the family by birth, not by their behavior or work on any given day. Parents don't say to their children, "As long as you get through the checklist for the day, then you can be our kids; but otherwise we're going to deny you." How awful it would be for a child to wonder if he'd been good enough on any given day to still be in the family. But that's not the case: a child is a family member because God has brought him there. His works have nothing to do with it.

So what makes you a son of God? You are not a son of God by your works, but by birth. You are God's beloved child because of your baptism, when you were born again into His family. There will be some days when you do a better job of obeying His Law, and some days when you find yourself getting mired in the same old sins. There will be some days when you've accomplished a lot of good in service to others, and other days when you take an account and find you've wasted the day with your own selfishness. But what makes you a beloved child? Not your works, but your birth—your baptism.

Do not underestimate the comfort that is yours with that truth. After all, what if your sonship in God's family was based upon your works? Then would you be more of a son on some days and less of a son on others? How "less of a son" could you be before you were outside the family and back in slavery to sin? How much would you have to do to be sure that you had a place at the table with the rest of the children of God? But your sonship doesn't depend on your works.

You're a son in the household of God because you've been born into the house of God. That's why it's such a good thing daily to say, "I am baptized." That is to say, "I am a beloved son of God because Jesus has delivered me from sin and into His family forever."

There will be those who misunderstand and twist this comfort to their own ends, who will say, "As long as I am baptized, I'm a son in God's family and I can do whatever I want! I'm going to be the wild-child of sin in the household of God." But the one who persistently, willfully sins is saying, "I don't want to be in this house. I don't want God as my Father; I want sin as my master." To say that is to renounce God, who has given His Son to bring you in. To say that is to run away from home. To such, however, the Lord is still faithful; and He still calls out to them in the words of the Old Testament lesson, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine"—in the hope that they might return and repent.

Make no mistake, that's the devil's angle. He hates Holy Baptism because as long as you're in God's family, you're not a slave to sin under his tyranny. He has no power, because Christ gutted his power on the cross. All he can do is tempt you, attempt to deceive you or seduce you with some sort of sin that makes you say, "I want that sin so much—or I fear that sin so much—that I'm willing to leave home." And to lead you in that direction, he tempts you to sloth, to spiritual apathy. He'd have you be the child of God who lies on the couch and says, "I'm here. I'm a son. I'm in. So while I'm not particularly interested in leaving home, I'm not particularly interested in doing what children of God do either. I don't especially want to listen to my Father, and I don't see any special need to join my brothers and sisters at the Supper. Likewise, I really see no need to do what my Father would have me do and work in service to others." The devil delights in such apathy because the child of God who has little interest in the things of God will find no comfort in them and he'll eventually be attracted to ungodly things outside the house.

That is why we return to the Gospel each week. As you hear and receive the forgiveness of sins, your baptism is renewed. You are assured once again that you remain God's beloved son. If it's a time where all is going well, thanks be to God for His blessings. If it is a time when you've caved to sin, rejoice that the Lord says, "Confess and be forgiven, and come to Supper! You're still My precious child—you're still inside My house." Where you're beaten up and beaten down and have little left to offer, you know that this trial will also pass: for you are a son of God. You're baptized, and the Lord will never leave you nor forsake you.

For when all is said and done, the most important question is this: are you wheat or are you chaff? Are you God's beloved son or a slave to sin? The answer you give is a precious one: "I am baptized." You are God's child—not by works, but by birth and thus you are a member of the family of God. All of this is for Jesus' sake. Jesus, who washed your sins off of you at your baptism and onto Him at His; who went to the cross in your place, and now has joined you to His death and resurrection; for whose sake God the Father now says to you, "You are My beloved son, because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen