

## **The Baptism of Our Lord**

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston  
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Twenty days ago we gathered to celebrate the birth of Jesus, born of Mary, laid in a manger in Bethlehem because there was no room in the Inn. Now less than three weeks later, we encounter Jesus at age 30 approximately. The event of his baptism marks the commencement of his ministry. What happened in his first 30 years remains hidden from us, for we focus on what we name his “public ministry” which culminates in his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. The first of those events happened at the River Jordan where John the Baptizer was used as the instrument of the Almighty to initiate the earthly ministry of our Lord and Savior.

Why was Jesus baptized? John called people to be baptized as a sign of their repentance and desire to commit their lives to more consistent obedience to the will of the Lord God Almighty. If Jesus was – as we profess – without sin, he had nothing for which to repent. So why did he submit to the baptism of repentance administered by John the Baptizer?

It was not because he needed to be baptized that Jesus came to John, it was because Jesus from the beginning of his ministry identified with us – with humanity – that he came to John and said, “Let it be so now” (Matthew 3:15). As we understand, Jesus was saying to John, “I have come to bear the sin of the world, a world that needs to repent and turn to The Father. I am beginning today to take upon myself the sin of the world, so I come to you to be baptized by a baptism of repentance on behalf of all.” I will be responsible for their sin.

Jesus stood with us in our need – our need to be reconciled with God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. He bridged that gap, the gap called sin and alienation. The Holy Spirit came from heaven in the form of a dove claiming this only Son of the Father as the vehicle of God’s salvation. His origin – his conception - is from the power of the Holy Spirit. His identity is clarified by the voice that speaks and the Holy Spirit who descends in the form of a dove. And his ministry is empowered by that Holy Spirit, all of which clarifies this unique life as God’s gift of cleansing and renewal given to all.

Martin Luther wrote in the Small Catechism this statement regarding Jesus; “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord.” So we speak of the divinity of Christ Jesus and the humanity of Christ Jesus. His baptism reveals his divinity and humanity coming together. The voice from heaven and the descent of the dove declares his divinity. In submitting to the baptism of repentance by John, Jesus demonstrates his humanity. This introduces Jesus and his ministry, and from his baptism on we learn more about who he is

and what he does – how this God/man brings Good News to earth and accomplishes the Almighty’s plan of salvation.

Lest we make John the Baptizer and his ministry something that it is not, we need to remember that what Jesus experienced in the River Jordan was not a Christian baptism. Baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit did not begin until after the Ascension of Jesus. So we need to exercise care not to confuse John’s baptism with baptism into Christ who died, was buried, and rose again on the third day.

My guess is that virtually all of us have been baptized. In baptism, we have been claimed and commissioned by Christ and made citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. Our primary identity and purpose is then to witness to the grace of Christ and live in obedience to him. No other claim, call, commission, or identity can take precedence over what Christ has given us in our baptisms. If we are ever asked about our citizenship, we are to answer, “I am a citizen of the Kingdom of God, full time.” Anyone ever asked you, “What is your sign?” I hope you answered, “The sign of the cross.” At each baptism, we hear these words addressed to the newly baptized. “Child of God you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever” (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 231). That’s how all the baptized are to understand themselves. It’s who we are! There is to be no competition for our loyalty, no compromise of our identity, no co-opting of our commitment by some other attraction or claim. We belong to Christ. Nothing is more important, period!

About now, I’d like to quote from William Willimon who wrote:

It may surprise you to hear me say this, but say this I will. I don’t know how to preach. I’ve only been trying to preach for the last 30 years, and after 30 years, I know less about how to preach a sermon than when I began.

I’ve learned: When it comes to sermons, people don’t listen, more accurately, people don’t *hear*. Too many obstacles to successful communication. Skeptical modern world, science, Attention Deficit Disorder, hormones, and sin. I work on a sermon, do my homework. Then I stand up here and thrash about for 20 minutes. Tell some sappy stories. Gesture from the torso. But you don’t hear! ...I can see that you don’t hear!

I don’t know how to preach. Tired every technique. Different forms and arrangements. It’s hard to hear the things of God, particularly things of God. How can you talk to someone about God? How do you speak in such a way that people don’t just hear *about* God but are brought *to* God? I have learned that it is just about impossible to get people to *get* a sermon.

*But sometimes they do.* People undeniably, hear. Most of you keep coming back because, having had the lightning strike once, it could well strike again, and you want to be here for it. Having once shuffled in here – distracted, unfocused, unsure – you have despite all, irrefutably *heard*.

Clergy friend of mine, for his sabbatical, didn't read books and write thoughts. He chose to travel about the country, visiting churches, listening to sermons. I asked him what he learned in his 30 sermon tour and he said, "I think it's a miracle that anybody every hears anything."

And yet, they do. Why? I think it's a miracle.

One of you has been attending this church for years. And yet you told somebody that you haven't understood but one sermon in a hundred in all those months of Sundays and you keep coming to church, Sunday after Sunday. Doesn't understand one sermon in a hundred! Why? I don't mean, "Why don't you understand," ... I mean "Why do you keep coming?"

Because (once), the heavens opened, a dove descended and down to the tips of your toes, you heard God so close you could feel the breath. ... When it's about God, it's always a gift. It's got to come "from heaven." I can't preach, you can't hear, except as miracle.

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The baptism of our Lord Jesus is a miracle – a voice from heaven, a dove descending. It's a miracle. So was my baptism and yours. A miracle happened. The command and Word of Christ Jesus was obeyed, followed, and declared, and I was made a child of God as were you. That simple act so long ago transformed life and injected the dimension of eternity into everything we are and everything we do.

I heard Marge Leegard speak about 25 or 30 years ago. She called herself a farmer from Minnesota where she and her husband farmed. Marge was a marvelous story teller, and in the particular instance I have in mind she told about her niece. I am unsure how long ago the incident happened, but it must have been about 50 years ago now – long before medical science had developed surgical therapies used for the condition to which I will refer.

Marge Leegard's niece and husband were very excited to be expecting their first child and were devastated when, upon the birth of this baby, they were informed that their child was hydrocephalic among other problems. The prognosis was not good. Their pastor ministered to them trying to offer the compassion of Christ and involving the presence of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit for this sorrowing couple. The congregation also offered its care, support, and concern.

As with any baby, this one was baptized. The date was about two months after the baby's birth, and the hydrocephalic condition was quite evident. When baptized, this baby like any other became a citizen of the Kingdom of God and a member of the Church. Attempting to declare the bond and responsibility shared by all the baptized and by that particular Minnesota congregation in their love for one another, the pastor said at the conclusion of the liturgy for Holy Baptism, "Remember, this baby belongs to all of us."

The mother and father were very faithful at worship, every time bringing their baby whose head was getting larger and larger as time went on. This baby did not roll over as babies normally do. In fact, this one's development was quite delayed as he struggled to live with his many impairing conditions. The parents would bring a pillow and lay the baby on the pillow on the pew between them.

One Sunday when the baby was about seven months old, and obviously very different than a normal baby, one of the members of the church stopped after worship at the pew where the young couple had placed themselves that Sunday. His words to them were, "I wish you wouldn't bring that baby to church. His appearance disturbs my worship." The mother, trying to hold back tears, almost in a plea, said to the man, "Remember, the pastor said he's your baby, too."

That's what the baptism of our Lord tries to tell us. He has come to identify with all our infirmities, with every impairment we may bear. Our disobedience causes great sorrow in God's heart and great offense in the human community. We distort the image of God in which we were created when we refuse to love, care, and give. Yet, the Great God of the Universe, sent us Jesus, his only Son, to become one of us and to take upon himself our sin and the sin of the world. He became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth, Emmanuel, God with us. His birth and his baptism declare to us God's identity with us on earth in all our joys and sorrows, our pleasures and pains.

He is with us, and we belong to Him. He has come for our sake. He was baptized for our sake, and we are invited to receive him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength – to love Him as he loved us - by giving his life for us and for all.

He knows our names, he knows our hearts, and he accepts and embraces each of us with a love that will not let us go. Thanks be to God, now and forever. Amen.