

In Baptism God Gives Us Grace

Text: Genesis 1:1-5

Acts 19:1-7 (Series B, Baptism of our Lord) Ps. 29

Mark 1:4-11

Prayer:

How fitting it seems to begin the New Year with the reading from Genesis 1 about Creation's First Day, with light overcoming darkness and wind across the waters; then, the Gospel of Mark detailing the baptism of Jesus which is considered the First Day for his official ministry, with the Holy Spirit arriving as a Dove and the Voice of God proclaiming Jesus as God's Son.

Given all that the Scripture of Advent gave us of John's instructions to *prepare the way* and now John baptizing *the one who is more powerful* than himself, I find it curious that Baptism has such varied practices across the breadth of Christianity. For some denominations, it is a *required sacrament*, for others a *rite of initiation* and *adoption into the Christian faith*. Baptism is required by some and deemed unimportant by others. Many believe that infant Baptism is necessary whenever possible, many others do not. Some may offer it to older children or teens and adults for admission into a particular congregation, whether or not one has been baptized elsewhere.

We are called by Jesus to follow Him, officially baptized or not, so why not start again at the beginning of this New Year and the symbolic beginning of his ministry? A new day begins. The words of an old African-American Spiritual say it best - God will trouble the water - stir it up - so we can see the right place to enter the path:

“Wade in the water. Wade in the water, children.
Wade in the water. God's a-goin' to trouble the water.”

“Look over yonder, what do you see? God's a-goin' to trouble the water.
The Holy Ghost a-comin' on me. God's a-goin' to trouble the water.”

From the waters of Creation to the waters of Birth and Baptism, Christ is our bridge over waters troubled and calm, and it is He who comes to set our souls ablaze with the infusion of the Holy Spirit.

Whether baptized by water, desire, or faith, before now or not, it is time to be refreshed and renewed as we begin our own ministry again. Come on in, this "water" is fine! Let us bathe in the Light of Christ and in the Fire of the Holy Spirit!

St. Mark's gospel begins with the baptism of Jesus, and leaves Jesus' conception and birth and his growing up for his fellow evangelists, Matthew and Luke, to tell us. For Mark, the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begins in the water of the Jordan River. To Mark, Jesus' baptism is his epiphany to Israel, his coming out of the darkness into the spot light, his manifestation to the world with the voice of the Father and the descent of the Holy Spirit. It is, in a very real sense, the beginning of the Gospel, the good news that salvation, forgiveness, life, and peace have come to us in God's Son.

Before his baptism, Jesus was largely unknown. He lived in obscurity in the town of Nazareth. There he was known simply as the "carpenter's son." He did nothing to distinguish himself from any other person. He preached no sermon. He worked no miracle.

Then, one day, Jesus came out of the darkness of obscurity to the light. He came to the banks of the Jordan River, in order to be baptized by John. John's baptism was a sinner's baptism, a washing of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

It is to this sinner's bath that Jesus came. This was part of Jesus' humbling, his becoming obedient to the Law, obedient even to death on a cross. He had no sin to confess, no stain that needed washing. He had no need for repentance. And yet Jesus submitted to John's baptism.

Jesus came to be the least among us, the servant of all. God reached all the way down to us in his Son. The Lord of all became the Servant of all. The *Sinless One* stood with sinners in the water of the Jordan.

Baptism is the great equalizer; in baptism we are all made children of God. It matters not whether you are a tiny infant or an adult, a prostitute, publican or a Pharisee, Jew or Gentile, religious or unreligious, educated or uneducated, wealthy or poor, a Liberal or a Conservative. As people, we delight in distinctions, don't we all? We look for ways to elevate ourselves over others. Yet, we are all baptized alike - with the same water, in the same Triune Name of God, into the same death and resurrection of Jesus. Truly, baptism is the mark of God's favour.

Imagine taking a bath in someone else's bath water; that's what Jesus did. The water of the Jordan teemed with sin the day Jesus was baptized. It was filled with the worst immorality our sinful nature could produce: drunkenness, deceit, pride, gossip, slander, greed, etc.

The Pharisees and religious leaders refused to step into such water. They didn't want to be seen in the same water with prostitutes and sinners. They had no felt need for repentance and washing.

But Christ was not ashamed to step into a sinner's bath water. He stood in the water with the prostitute and the tax collector, with the Gentile and the outcast. He stood shoulder to shoulder in solidarity with sinners.

He was steeped in our sin. He became the drunkard, the liar, the thief, the blasphemer, the murderer, the abortionist. He was made sin for us who knew no sin, so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God. This is the Good News of the Bible.

Luther called it a "*happy exchange*," a sweet swap. That's what the baptism of Jesus is about. He was baptized into our death and damnation; we are baptized into his life and promise of salvation. He was baptized into the curse of the Law; we are baptized into God's blessing and favour that comes with his perfect obedience.

I had the opportunity to see the Jordan River with my own eyes, and it isn't pretty. Jordan River water isn't terribly clean; it never has been. By his way of looking at things, it wasn't the water but the Word of God that was joined to the water that made it a cleansing water.

And it is the Word of God - the Word made Flesh, Jesus - who joins himself to the water that makes Baptism a water of life, a water rich in God's grace, a water that brings rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

The Word of God was joined with the water in a marvelous way that day at the Jordan River. The sinless Son of God absorbed the pollution of our sin and purified it with his blood. Never had water been so graced by God, as the day the Son of God entered the water and sanctified it.

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness. He is Israel reduced to one man. He does what Israel could not do, what we cannot do: be the obedient sons and daughters of God. "*Behold my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one in whom I delight*" (Is. 42:1). At the moment of Jesus' baptism, the heavens were torn open.

Through Jesus, God has opened heaven. There is a door for the rebel children of Adam to return home, reborn and renewed, to enter his presence. That door is the narrow way of Jesus' *death* and *resurrection*. Baptism brings us through that narrow door, joining us with Jesus' death and life.

In Jesus' baptism, God showed us that in our Baptism, heaven is opened to us. The barrier between us and God is torn down. The door is unlocked, the gate is unbarred.

We have peace with God through Jesus; we have access to God's grace. We may come into his presence with thanksgiving and enter his courts with praise. Heaven is opened to us, and God meets us. Where? In the water.

The Spirit, who once hovered over the waters of creation, now descends the water where the Son is. Baptism is a beginning, a new creation. *"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come"* (2 Co. 5:17)

A dove signaled the end of the flood to Noah. Again, a dove signals peace. Peace with God. *"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Ro.5:1).

The Father is revealed. In Jesus' baptism, the Father publicly installs his Son as his Servant. Jesus' baptism is his ordination, his inauguration into office. Here he takes up his task - to suffer and die, and to rise on the third day and be glorified.

'The One who would be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities... who would bear the sins of the many and make intercession for the transgressors' (Is. 53:5, 12).

The Voice from heaven and the descending Dove tell us to look *nowhere* else for a gracious God but where this Man Jesus is. He is the One to whom the Spirit points. He is the One who points us to the Father.

He deals quietly and gently with us in our brokenness. He brings healing to our wounds. He opens eyes that are blind. He frees those who are captive to sin and death. He releases those who sit in a dungeon of darkness and brings them into the warmth of his light and love.

The Large Catechism states: *"Nevertheless I am baptized! And if I am baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body."* We would encourage others to Baptism, offer Baptism up as the greatest gift and treasure that Jesus Christ has given us.

As we remember Jesus' baptism - the heavens torn open, the dove descending, the voice of the Father - those things didn't happen for Jesus' benefit but for ours, that we might delight in our Baptism and walk in this promise, and know that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are mightily at work there to save us.

In Baptism, God gives grace. "There stood the Son of God in love, His grace to us extending; The Holy Spirit like a dove, Upon the scene descending; The Triune God assuring us. With promises compelling, That in our Baptism He will thus. Among us find a dwelling. To comfort and sustain us." Amen.

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