

The Happy Exchange

Christ's Baptism, Our Sanctification

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 requiring sacrament, for others a rite of initiation and adoption into the Christian faith. Baptism is required by some and deemed unimportant by others.

We are called by Jesus Christ 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.

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 quietly in the town of Nazareth. There he was known simply as the "carpenter's son." The baby Simeon and Anna adored at his presentation in the temple. Magi from eastern lands graced him with their generous gifts as a young child.

Then, for the next eighteen years, there is nothing to be known, nothing to distinguish him 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*. People came to the Jordan wilderness to be washed by Jordan, confessing their 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. He lowered himself to be baptized as a sinner. 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. God plays no favorites, it doesn't matter 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? We look for ways to elevate ourselves over others, don't we?

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. It's a rather disgusting thought, especially in our time when we are obsessed with the idea of "**catching something**" from someone else. We are reluctant to share a cup with our fellow Christians, much less share a common bath.

But that's what Jesus did. The water of the Jordan teemed with sin the day Jesus was baptized. It was filled: the worst of our immorality, drunkenness, deceit, pride, gossip, slander, greed our sinful nature can produce.

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. Jesus took up *our sin, our guilt, our punishment, our death*. And we receive from him his *righteousness, his forgiveness, his glory, his life*. He was baptized into our *sin*; we are baptized into his *righteousness*.

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. It never has been. By the 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.

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.

At the moment of Jesus' baptism, the heavens were torn open. And voice was heard *"Behold my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one in whom I delight."* 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 through faith. The barrier between us and God is torn down. The door is unlocked, the gate is unlocked.

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."*

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."*

The Father is revealed. In Jesus' baptism the Father publicly installs his Son as his Servant. Jesus' baptism is his ordination; his inauguration into the office of ministry. 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).

God 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.

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 by faith, and know that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are mightily at work there to save us.

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 renew our faith and our ministry again.

Come on in, this "water" is fine! Let us bathe in the Light of Christ and the Fire of the Holy Spirit! Welcome to another refreshing, revitalizing, and rededicating of faith and joy in Christ, in this moment, in this New Day, New Year, and New Spirit. Baptism is the greatest gift and treasure that Jesus Christ has given us, let us walk in that promise. **Amen.**

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