

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/12/2014, The Baptism of Our Lord
Matthew 3:13-17

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text for this sermon is the last verse of our Gospel Lesson — that happy verse about voice of God the Father:

¹⁷and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17, RSV)

This baptism is the reason for the creation of the whole universe, including far away stars and planets and stretching back millennium upon millennium: All that God made was waiting and hoping and straining ahead for this moment, when a young man named Jesus, from a provincial town called Nazareth, should leave his hometown and come and be baptized. And as he was baptized, the mighty heart of God burst forth into joy: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” Aye, there is joy in the heart of our Maker, for the baptism of Jesus commences the salvation of that race of creatures our God so deeply and strangely loves from all eternity. I mean us: poor, fallible, human creatures that we are.

My aim in this sermon is to look at the Baptism of Our Lord from three different perspectives: First, from the perspective of an ordinary human point of view. Here we see a good young man responding to the call of God, as we should do too. Second, let’s consider the Baptism of Our Lord in accordance with the voice from heaven, trying to take in the great wonder of this event. And third, let’s look at the story from the point of those who follow Jesus and are baptized into him.

AN ORDINARY HUMAN POINT OF VIEW

So let’s begin by considering the Baptism of Our Lord from an ordinary human point of view, thinking of Jesus simply as a good young man before we learn that he is the very Son of God. How did Jesus look, for example, in the eyes of his neighbors?

From another of the Gospels, we learn that Jesus was thirty years old when he came to the John to be baptized:

²³Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli... (Luke 3:23, RSV)

Though we can be sure that Jesus was a good boy and then a good man in his early life, we do not really know much about Jesus before age thirty — little about how he used his time or his friendships or his trials and temptations. We do have the lovely saying about the twelve-year-old Jesus being obedient to his parents and growing up “in wisdom and stature, in favour with God and man”:

⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man. (Luke 2:52, KJV)

Perhaps we can speculate about his vocation. Jesus was known as “the carpenter’s son”:

⁵⁵Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?

This does not necessarily mean that Jesus himself was a carpenter, but I like to think he was. It pleases me to think of him working along old Joseph in the carpentry shop.

Mary, his mother, pondered in her heart the wonderful events connected with his birth, and perhaps the shepherds who heard the Christmas angels did too. But for most people who knew Jesus, they probably thought of him as a good young man, like other good young people they might have known.

Now we come to a blessed point in the story: There came a time in the life of this good young man, Jesus, when God beckoned to him to make a change in his life, and he obeyed. His mother might have been surprised by this, his friends might have been dismayed that he was leaving them behind there in Nazareth. But Jesus received a call to go the Jordan River and off he went. It was time for him to begin his public ministry.

To say that our Lord Jesus is “both God and man” does not mean that he was *less* than a man. He faced human choices, like we do, with the capacity to say yes but also to say no. One of those choices was to begin his ministry, and praise God, he did! At a certain point in his life, Jesus bade farewell to his hometown and his familiar ways of life, and he went out into the wilderness to be baptized by John.

Likewise for you and me: May I suggest to you, my dear friends, that it is the right time in life for you to respond to God’s call. It might be the right time for you to make a significant change in life. Only your own heart knows about

this in detail, but at least I can point to a general principle: Our God wants you to draw closer to Jesus. This might mean a significant change, as when our dear Choir member Jim Miller headed off to seminary. For others of you, the change might be less dramatic, but very important nonetheless, for if you take the step of drawing closer to Jesus, then in the process you are going to be giving up some of your sins and improving your spirit and way of life. From an ordinary human point of view, Jesus changed his manner of life and began walking a new path. He felt the call to yield to his Father's will in this matter of baptism, and he did it! You and I can be like him in this. We can open ourselves to a change in life, all for the sake of a closer walk with Christ.

So, that is my first perspective on the baptism of Jesus. In the eyes of his neighbors, Jesus was probably a good young man like others. But God's call came to him to do this thing, and he did it. Let us go and do likewise.

THE DIVINE DIMENSION

For our second perspective on the baptism of our Lord, let's consider the divine dimension of things.

Notice that this good young man, Jesus, did not *become* the Son of God at his Baptism. He always was so, from all eternity. So, when the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove, the Father did not say, "Now you become my beloved Son," but rather, "This *is* my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

This is a revelation here at the beginning of things—a revelation that will become public at the resurrection of Jesus. We do not know whether John the Baptist heard the voice from heaven — St. Matthew does not say. But if John heard it, he heard something that would later thrill the heart of Mary Magdalene and the other holy women when they met the risen Jesus at the tomb, fell and his feet, and worshiped him:

⁹And as they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, All hail. And they came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him. (Matthew 28:9, KJV)

From an ordinary human point of view, what the onlookers at the baptism of Jesus saw was a good young man being baptized, and John the Baptist being much moved by it all. But from heaven's point of view, the mighty battle for human salvation was commencing, and the innocent One was taking his stand with a shipwrecked human race, ready to fight for them to the last drop of his blood.

St. John Chrysostom started off his homily on our text focusing on this wonder: that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity should be humbling

himself alongside a sinful humanity. Chrysostom's grammar is a little hard for us modern folk, but it is worth thinking about:

With the servants the Lord, with the criminals the Judge,
cometh to be baptized.

Rearranging this sentence a little, we get this:

With the servants, the Lord comes to be baptized. With the
criminals, the Judge comes to be baptized.

No wonder God the Father looking on thunders an exclamation. It is indeed a strange sight. The Holy One is baptized with the sinners. The Innocent is willingly baptized with guilty. The One who deserves no suffering in this world throws himself into a world of suffering for the sake of sinners. I think we can only be glad that the Holy Spirit did not fly away, refusing to participate in this baptism, and that the exclamation of the heavenly Father was not, "No! I forbid this!" But rather, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." This triune consent at the Baptism of Jesus is the Gospel. It is teeming with hope for our human race.

And speaking of the Holy Spirit, notice that in this story, it is as it was in the story of Noah and the ark. For it is a dove that again signifies peace and salvation on earth.¹ You remember the ancient history, how it was the return of a dove with an olive branch in her mouth that signified to Noah that salvation was at hand:

...and the dove came back to him in the evening, and lo, in
her mouth a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that
the waters had subsided from the earth. (Genesis 8:11, RSV)

Likewise here, at the Baptism of our Lord: the appearance of that gentle creature, the dove, signifies that our world is not meant to perish, but that life and salvation are near.

FOR US

Finally, a word for us who have been baptized into Jesus Christ: As heaven was opened on that good day, the day of our Lord's baptism, so heaven was opened for you on that good day, the day of your baptism. A gateway to heaven was opened to you when you gave yourself over to Jesus.

¹ A point made by St. John Chrysostom in his homily on this passage.

Our text says that the Lord is well pleased with Jesus at his baptism. Let the echo of that divine affirmation extend to your soul too, for by baptism you too are made a child of God. St. Paul beautifully speaks of this in Ephesians 1:

⁵He destined us for adoption *as his children* through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us *in the Beloved*. (Ephesians 1:5-6, NRSV)²

“In the Beloved” — that is, in Jesus. It is as if the smile of God upon Jesus reaches to every one of the friends of Jesus too. Those divine words, then, that came down from heaven applied first of all to Jesus:

This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.
(Matthew 3:17, KJV)

But if you are a Christian, you belong to Christ, and therefore you can take these words to heart and apply them to yourself: *You* are God’s beloved child, in whom he is well pleased. Hard to imagine, when we consider what such mixed creatures we are, that holy God above should find pleasure in us! But if we belong to Christ, we thereby belong to God, who cherishes us as a good Father cherishes his children — even his prodigal children who at last come home.

Your real home, then, is above, and you should not cling overmuch to the things of this earth. This was a constant theme in the preaching of Jesus, that we should lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven, rather than permit love of money or vice to rivet us down to this earth:

¹⁹Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: ²⁰But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: (Matthew 6:19-20, KJV)

And this brings us back to my first point: This is the right time in your life to draw closer to Jesus, to follow him, with even more earnestness, in his life of love, to the benefit of our neighbors and to the glory of his name, even Jesus

² Johann Gerhard, *Postilla* Vol. 1 (The Center for the Study of Lutheran Orthodoxy: Malone, Texas, 2001), page 73.

Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.