In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning we have heard of when our Lord was baptized by John at the River Jordan by John the Baptist. In Advent we had heard frequently from John the Baptist. John came to prepare the way of the Lord. He preached repentance, condemning sin and injustice, and he warned about the wrath of God. “Even now,” John said, “even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:9). And the people had been cut to the heart. The people of Israel heard the word of the Lord from John, and they responded by receiving baptism at his hands.

In being baptized the people of Israel were committing themselves to a life of repentance. When being baptized, the multitudes asked him: if the axe is already at the root of the trees, “what then shall we do?” John answered them, “he who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food let him do likewise” (3:10–11). And then tax collectors and soldiers came to him, with contrite and repentant hearts, and likewise asked what they should do after being baptized. John told the tax collectors, “collect no more than is appointed you” (v. 13). And to the soldiers he gave instruction that they should “rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with their wages” (v. 14). In other words, after being baptized, they were to live lives of justice and generosity, turning away from unjust gains and giving to others when someone has a need and they could meet that need. Such would be fruit in keeping with repentance.

It cannot be overestimated how influential and important John the Baptist was in his day. In the gospel according to Saint Mark we perhaps get a better clue as to how influential John was. There it says, “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan confessing their sins” (Mark 1:4–5). All of the country of Judea and all of the people of Jerusalem went to John and were baptized. Jesus himself said that John was a prophet, and even greater than a prophet. Isaiah and Jeremiah and Elijah and Elisha are all superseded by this one man, the greatest of all the prophets and himself greater than a prophet. But Jesus’ praise of John goes even further. Jesus later said of his own cousin: “I tell you, among those born of women
none is greater than John” (Luke 7:28). John stands out amongst prophets and amongst all of those born of women, all of humankind.

So is it any surprise then that the people of Israel start to wonder, might John be the Messiah? Might he be the Christ that Israel has been waiting so long for? Might he be the one that the prophets foretold and yearned to see? Our reading said,

“As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ, John answered them all, ‘I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire’” (Luke 3:15–16).

The whole of Jerusalem and Judea had been cut to the heart by the words of John, and yet John points to another, to one so great that this immensely influential and important prophet is not even worthy to untie the straps of his sandals. John’s words seem to us to have much spirit, inspiring repentance and contrition of heart. But this other one comes able to baptize in the Holy Spirit, to give, impart the Spirit. John’s preaching seems to us to be full of fire. Remember what he had said when the multitudes came to him: “you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Luke 3:7). Full of fire indeed. But this other one comes to baptize with fire. This one comes, in the words of John, with “His winnowing fork in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (3:17).

But if this is the one that John himself looks forward to, that John is preparing the way for, why would this Christ come to the Jordan river, not to replace John, not to baptize John, but to permit himself to be baptized at the hands of John? John said that he comes to baptize with the Spirit and with fire, so why he instead the one being baptized?

And, according to Scripture, the Baptism of John is a Baptism of repentance. Did the one born of the Virgin need to repent of his sins? Did the one who was with God in the beginning, the one who was God himself become flesh, need to repent of being alienated and estranged from God? The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and was like us in every way except for one: he was without sin.

In the Nicene Creed we confess, “for us and for our salvation, [Jesus] came down from heaven.” But Jesus did not just come down from heaven for our salvation. This line stands as a sort of heading over all that comes afterwards. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven. For us and for our salvation he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man. For us
and for our salvation he was crucified under Pontius Pilate. For us and for our salvation he rose again on the third day. The whole of Christ’s life, from his incarnation until his ascension to the Father’s right hand and his coming again in glory has the heading over it: for us and for our salvation.

So then, why is Christ baptized for us and for our salvation?

The first reason that Jesus is baptized, is so that he could sanctify our own baptisms. As Jesus was born without sin so that we might be reborn in him, as he was circumcised in order to specifically identify himself with Israel, so too was Jesus baptized so that our baptisms might join us to Christ. Whenever someone is baptized in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, that one is coming to have a share in Christ’s own Baptism. When water is poured over the head of a little one, or when an adult is plunged underneath the waters of Holy Baptism, it is as if that one is standing in the River Jordan with Jesus. Likewise in the Nicene Creed we say that we believe in one Baptism. There is one Baptism, and that Baptism in Christ’s own Baptism, which when we are baptized we are brought to share in. Martin Luther, in the very last month of his life, preached an Epiphany sermon on the Baptism of our Lord, and he said this about the relation between Christ’s Baptism and ours: “Do not separate your Baptism from Christ’s Baptism. You must come with your Baptism into Christ’s Baptism so that Christ’s Baptism is your Baptism and your Baptism is Christ’s Baptism, in every respect one Baptism.”¹ When we are baptized, Christ’s Baptism becomes our own. Or as Saint Paul says in Galatians, “as many of you as were baptized have put on Christ” (3:7). In Holy Baptism, we put on Christ as if he were our clothing, his righteousness and his life and his Baptism become ours. Christ’s Baptism and our Baptism together only make one Baptism. For us and for our salvation, for our own Baptisms, Christ Jesus was baptized.

And if this is true, if Jesus’ Baptism becomes our own, then to understand our Baptisms we look to his; to know what is happening in our Baptisms, we look to what was said about Jesus’ Baptism.

And here we see why it is that the one who comes to Baptize with Spirit and with fire, comes first to be baptized. Since his Baptism becomes ours, we can see then why Jesus was willing to undergo the washing of repentance. He did not need it for himself, but you and I needed it. Jesus did not need to repent for himself, he did not need to be washed away of any sins that he had committed. But you and I did. As in the says of Noah, the whole world needed

to be washed of its sins, needed to be cleansed and made pure. But instead of destroying the whole world with a flood, instead of submerging the whole world under water, the Word became flesh and himself was submerged under the water so that the sins of humankind might be destroyed and humanity given new life. Jesus was baptized with the baptism of repentance, so that in your baptism and in mine, we would be given the gift of repentance, repentance perfect and complete. For us and for our salvation, for our repentance, Christ Jesus was baptized.

Our reading said, “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove” (3:21). Heaven was opened and the Spirit descends upon Jesus. Throughout the Old Testament, the Spirit would come upon people for specific times and purposes, but here the Spirit descends upon Jesus never to leave. It might seem a bit odd that Jesus receives the Spirit of God. For he is himself God, he himself dwelt in loving fellowship with the Father and the Spirit for all of eternity. Does this mean that prior to this Jesus had somehow been separated from the Holy Spirit, that he had not yet received the Spirit of God? Not at all. Jesus here received the Holy Spirit for you and for me, for us and for our salvation. He received the Holy Spirit so that when you were baptized, you too would receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus received the Holy Spirit into his human body so that your very body too might receive and be filled with the Holy Spirit of Christ. We are given great assurance here that we who have been baptized have received the Spirit of God. We may not necessarily see the Spirit of God descending on any of us in the form of a dove, but nevertheless, by faith we perceive and we know that in Baptism the Spirit is given to us and we are filled. For us and for our salvation, for our reception of the Spirit of God, Christ Jesus was baptized.

Our reading continues, “heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased” (3:22). In Holy Baptism we are reborn. We were born sons and daughters of Adam, children of disobedience and wrath. But in Baptism we are reborn, reborn as sons and daughters of God, children of righteousness. At your Baptism, God the Father said to you, “you are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased.” In your Baptism you were united with Christ Jesus, and the love and delight and pleasure that God the Father has in his Son he now has in you, and in me. This is what Saint Paul is speaking of in Romans 8, that beautiful chapter of Holy Scripture. If you have time today perhaps you could read the whole of that chapter aloud to yourself, perhaps even commit it to memory. In Romans 8, Saint Paul says, “All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the Spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of
sonship [or adoption]” (vv. 14–15). The Spirit has descended upon us, has come to dwell in us, so that we might be adopted as children of God, so that we can call Jesus Christ our brother. So that his Father would be our Father. The same love that the Father has eternally had for his only begotten Son, he now gives to us. He sent his Son in the likeness of sinful human flesh so that this love could be shared with us. For us and for our salvation, for our adoption as children of God, Christ Jesus was baptized.

By way of a conclusion I want to return to something I had already passed over earlier, something that our reading said before the Father spoke from heaven and before the Spirit descended upon Christ: “when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened” (3:21). Heaven was opened on that day. We should not imagine that heaven was opened for the Father to speak once, and for the Spirit descend, and then heaven was immediately closed up afterwards. No. “Where Christ is, heaven stands open.”² On that day, heaven was opened, and it stands open even now. From that day until the day that Christ returns upon the clouds in glory, heaven stands open. Christ’s return upon the clouds can happen at any moment, for heaven stands open. Today, heaven stands open for the Father to look down upon you with delight and pleasure and love, and to tell you over and over again, without ceasing, you are his beloved son, you are his beloved daughter. This day, heaven stands open for the Spirit of God to hover over you and to fill you with the love of God. The Light of the world can shine in the darkness of this world, illuminating us, for heaven stands open. The Word of God can descend upon this table and make a simple wafer of bread and a simple cup of wine to be Christ’s own body and blood for you, for heaven stands open. And if anyone is here who has not been baptized, know this, heaven stands open for you now, so that Christ’s Baptism might be made your own. Heaven stands open so that one day we might see God, not in the likeness of a dove, not only in a voice thundering from heaven, but more clearly than we see one another now. For us and for our salvation, so that we might see God face to face, Christ Jesus was baptized, “to whom belongs glory and dominion for ever and ever” (1 Peter 4:11). Amen.