



The Baptism of the Lord
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Well, good morning. You are a hearty group to get out here in that cold weather. It is cold out there. The wind is blowing, and I just. We are thankful for your presence here. Thank you for coming.

You may or may not understand it or think about it. You probably understand it, but you may not think about it, but you are doing a righteous act right now. You are being righteous. You are doing a good thing by being here with us, worshiping the Lord together, fellowshiping with us. And in the homily, it will make sense why I just said that to you.

I'd like you to start out by imagining that you are a Jew in first century Israel and you've heard of this John the Baptist fellow who is going around preaching what's called "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins". He is challenging people to cleanse their hearts in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. And you are hoping to be baptized by him yourself. You're humbly repentant before God and waiting in line for a chance to be baptized. You're getting close. There's a big line, but there's a man ahead of you. And later on you will learn that his name is Jesus. He seems quiet and gentle, and yet, you know, he seems strong and formidable in a way, but also unassuming and sort of humble. And when John the Baptist sees him, he pauses and he seems reluctant to baptize this man.

And you hear this conversation between them. John says, it is I who should be baptized by you. But Jesus says quietly but assertively, "allow it now, for it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness". So you watch as John baptizes Jesus. It's a familiar ritual. Submersion into water was a traditional purity ritual in Israel. And so you wait your turn. But as Jesus comes up from the water, the most amazing and unexpected events occur. The sky separates, the heavens open for Jesus, glorious and spectacular, yet comforting and embracing light shines from heaven. And you see the Holy Spirit descending as a dove landing upon Jesus.

What could this mean? You think, who could this be? See a prophet? Is he the Messiah? What's happening?

Finally, you hear a voice that our psalm describes as mighty and majestic, coming from the heavens, saying, "this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased".

And in a moment, the Spirit of God fills you with a dizzying clarity. That may sound contradictory, but my guess is that's how it felt, both confusing and clear at the same time. You're overwhelmed and calmed. You're joyous and fearful. You fall to your knees in the presence of God for you have experienced the Holy Trinity through the audible voice of God the Father, in the humble, eternal servant of Jesus, who is sharing in our human experience in the waters of baptism and in the descent of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus already fully possessed, who has just now adjoined Jesus public ministry and mission.

And you kneel before the Messiah, who did not come into this world as a harsh military leader to conquer and depose, but as a gentle and humble child who grew to be a servant even to the point of death, on behalf of not only the Jews, but, as our reading tells us, for all who fear him and seek to do good. You kneel before the Messiah, who in his baptism entered your life quietly, not not seeking to damage the weak, but to heal and to foster justice in people's lives. Not seeking to dominate, but to serve, who crossed boundaries, touched the untouchable, welcomed outsiders, who opened the eyes of the blind and those who live in darkness and, as our Scriptures tell us, brought prisoners out from confinement.

You catch his gaze as he leaves the waters and enters the crowd, and you feel unsettled because it feels like he knows you deeply already. And you feel compelled to follow him to absorb his holiness. He begins to minister to the people, and you find yourself inspired to care for others with the same compassion, because he turns virtue into action and love into ministry.

You don't realize it yet, for like, how can you? But Jesus descent into the Jordan river and rising from its waters, point ultimately to his sacrificial death on the cross and his glorious resurrection, which will occur three years from now. And that death and resurrection will defeat the power and penalty that sin has over you. And during those three years, you will learn from him and agonize for Him. You will love him and you will defend him. You will be obedient to him at times and at others you will fail him and be forgiven by Him.

You'll be confounded and challenged by his thoughts, and he will exhort you to live for righteousness and love others as he has loved you. Ultimately, you will be baptized yourself by him, with the Holy Spirit in a purification as thorough as by fire. And when you are baptized by him, the Scripture tells us, you will be joined to him and your old sinful self - your old sinful nature will be crucified, buried with him in baptism, so that sin will lose its power in your life. So that you are no longer a slave to sin. And because you died with Christ, you will also be able to live with Him.

All right, that's the image of what I think it would have been like to watch Jesus being baptized and follow him in the immediate three years. Let's come back to the present, brothers and sisters. Just like for a first century disciple, Jesus made it possible for us to choose righteousness in all of our activities, to live every moment for the glory of God.

Of course, you know, now as long as we're in these bodies, until our souls are fully purified in heaven and we get our new holy bodies, we are still going to be challenged by the temptation to sin. That's just our human reality. But because of Christ's crucifixion and death and resurrection predicted by this baptism, we are not helpless to sin. Too often we go through life with the attitude that we are destined to fail spiritually. I am.

I feel that not infrequently. Too often I expect to sin and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. And I don't fight the good fight during the day. Too often we accept just going through life like everyone else, you know, like, you know, as long as I don't punch somebody in the face and cuss at them, you know, I must be doing okay. That must be holy.

Minimal politeness becomes our standard of holiness. Too often we lose sight of the grace that's been afforded to us when Christ fulfilled righteousness and the potential that we have to really fulfill righteousness ourselves. Brothers and sisters, we cannot let how we think about ourselves be based on our old sinful nature. We need to think of ourselves as those freed from the grip of sin and alive to God in Christ.

So I'd like you now to imagine again, to think about a typical day in your life. I want you to imagine going through whatever it is that you have to do on that day. You start the day by getting the kids ready and different stuff that you have to prepare in the house the morning or you're driving to work or going to school. And I'd like you to imagine thinking, I'm going to fulfill righteousness today. I'm going to drive righteously, I'm going to care for the kids righteously. And when you're at work or doing whatever other tasks and errands that you have, you think, what will fulfilling righteousness look like today for me?

And it doesn't always have to be that conscious a thought. Excuse me, you don't have to work hard at it necessarily all the time, but maybe at first. And then it becomes a natural part of your life or a feeling, a natural approach, and you just feel like I'm just going to do good today. What would Jesus do? And you feel hopeful and optimistic, and that's just going to be the way that you live.

And when it's early evening and you're tired, you still have all these things to do to finish before the end of the day. Instead of just giving in and being crabby and cantankerous with your family or roommates because you're exhausted, you think, how can I finish out this day righteously without killing somebody? That's probably a pretty low bar. Maybe you could raise the bar a little bit and really be loving and caring. What I encourage you and me and everyone else here to do today, every day as you go out and start your day, is to say to yourself, how can I fulfill righteousness today?



How will I live for God the Father like Jesus did? How am I going to present myself to God today as one who is alive from the dead, resurrected and renewed in life by the Lord. And if during the day you goof up somewhere along the way, don't get discouraged, don't despair, don't give up. Quickly confess it and recognize that your sin is forgiven already by the grace of the Lord because of that very same death and resurrection, and quickly get back to living a risen new life.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus' baptism was no mere passing event in his life. It was the inauguration of his public ministry. It was the confirmation by the Father that Jesus was God in the flesh. And it revealed to all of us that a new life of freedom from sin and freedom to love is now available to us through Him. He enabled us to fulfill righteousness ourselves in each moment of the day. We didn't get to see Jesus' baptism up close and personal, but that doesn't mean that we can't be as faithful as a disciple, as one who did.

And when we do, when we act that faithfully, we will be able to, as our psalmist says, "give to the Lord the glory and praise due his name". May God help us to live for Him.