

His Baptism and Ours

Matthew 3:13-17

Last week the Gospel reading from Luke 2 you heard that Jesus was left behind by his parents in Jerusalem. When I read this last year before I realized we would be away I couldn't help but think of what has become classic Christmas movie, **"Home Alone."** If you're not familiar with the movie, it's about a boy around the age of 10-12 years-old who is unintentionally left at home for Christmas when his large and extended family take a vacation to France. The family gets on the plane and it takes off and that's when the mom has a feeling that she's forgotten something, only to realize that she forgot her son, Kevin, at home. Not to ruin the ending if you haven't seen it, but the family is eventually reunited after the mischievous little boy spends a few nights at home alone.

Well, we might call the account that you heard last week "Jerusalem Alone." But that account is not about of some mischievous little boy surviving in the big city or negligent parents who forgot their son. That was the account of God's Son Jesus, knowing exactly who he was and why he had come into the world.

Today we skip through a few decade and find ourselves at yet another significant event in the life of Jesus. **The theme of the first Sunday after the Epiphany is the baptism of our Lord, the event by which the quiet carpenter of Nazareth became consecrated to be the Kingdom-building Son of God and began his Messianic career.**

The event becomes meaningful to us when we see what effect this event has upon our own baptism, that sacramental act by which our lives became dedicated to him and his Kingdom.

Preaching outdoors on the banks of the Jordan, John announces that the long-awaited Messiah is about to appear and the Kingdom of God is about to be ushered in.

Of those who seek entrance into the Kingdom he demands repentance, a genuine change of heart, in place of mere adherence to the dead forms of their inherited religion. **And those who repent step down into the river and John administers to them the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.**

Then one day Jesus of Nazareth walks down to the river and presents himself for baptism. The two young men were acquainted with each other. They were indeed blood-relatives, for the New Testament identifies Elizabeth, the mother of John, as a kinswoman of Mary, the mother of Jesus. John knew the character of him who had grown up "in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man."

And now when Jesus asks him for baptism, John has something still more than the sense of reverence that one feels in the presence of a person of spiritual power. He had begun to feel, although he was still uncertain and hesitant, that this Jesus was none other than the one who was to come, the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

John is awed and shaken to the depths of his being. **"You come to me for baptism,"** he says, **"it is I who need to be baptized by you."** To John there was something highly inappropriate in the idea that he who could well be the Messiah needs to be baptized with the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But Jesus pleads, **"Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."** Then John consents and Jesus is baptized.

It is in what followed immediately after the baptism that we with John receive the answer both to the question whether this Jesus is the Messiah and to the question why it is fitting that the Messiah, the holy and righteous one, should receive along with sinful people the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The heavens were opened, the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus, and **"Lo, a voice from heaven, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'"**

It is important to observe that this consecration by the Spirit and the words by which God's seal of approval is placed upon Jesus as the Messiah are clearly the fulfillment of the prophetic word in Isaiah 43:1, **"Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him."** Jesus was not appointed by God to be the kind of Messiah that the people expected, a glorious national hero who would lead them to war against Rome. **No, he was to be the kind of Messiah described in the book of Isaiah. There we learn that the Messiah is the Suffering Servant of God, the only righteous one who identifies himself with the sins of the many, bears their sins as his own so that they may share in his righteousness.** The road to Calvary began at the Jordan. Through his baptism he entered the path that would lead to the cross. His baptism was not complete until he had fulfilled his mission as Savior of sinners and could say from the cross, **"It is accomplished."**

Here, then, is the key for understanding the meaning of our own baptism into Christ Jesus.

Baptism is the starting point of life "in Christ." What happened to him happens also to us. His death is our death. His resurrection is our resurrection. **"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life"** (Romans 6:4).

What needs to be stressed over and over again is that baptism is the working of God, **not a work of ours**. This is the constant emphasis in the New Testament. **"He saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit"** (Titus 3:5). We are baptized, it is something that is done to us, not something that we ourselves do. It is for this reason that the church from its very beginning has baptized even little children, who can do nothing. The New Testament church could not forget the Lord's word, **"Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God"** (Luke 18:16).

But did not the Lord also say, **"He who believes and is baptized will be saved"**? Let us not forget this: our faith is always a response to what God does, and baptism represents what God does. It is God's baptism.

Just as the baptism of Jesus included all that was to follow and was fulfilled only in his death and resurrection, so our baptism anticipates our entire life right up to the hour of death. Our whole life, not just the moment of baptism whether it was early or late, is included in what God did with us in our baptism. **What was done to us was that we were united with Christ, we became his and are no longer our own. Through Christ our life was taken up into God's life.** The one business of our life now is to realize and give effect to what God did and gave. **In baptism, as Paul says, we died to sin and can therefore no longer live in sin. Baptism takes effect in us as we daily die to sin and daily rise with Christ into a new life.**

This is the essential significance of our baptism, as Luther points out in the Small Catechism. He asks, **"What does such baptizing with water signify?" and answers, "It signifies that the old Adam in us should, by daily sorrow and repentance, be drowned and die, with all sins and evil lusts; and again a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever."**

A Norwegian pastor was asked once, **"If the old Adam has been drowned in baptism, why do we have to keep on drowning him day after day?"** The answer was, **"The old rascal knows how to swim."** The new life is a daily return to the grace of baptism for power to wage a victorious battle against the old sinful nature which stubbornly seeks to regain the upper hand.

Today our Lord says to us as he once said to his first disciples, **"With the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized"** (Mark 10:39). We pray that our lives may be united ever more closely with his saving life. As this takes place, the heavens will open to us too, and gently and peacefully as the lighting of a dove the Spirit of God will settle upon us. And we too will hear in our hearts the voice that says, **"My beloved."**