

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John at the Jordan. ¹⁴But John tried to stop him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?”

¹⁵But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, because it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John let him. ¹⁶After Jesus was baptized, he immediately went up out of the water. Suddenly, the heavens were opened for him! He saw the Spirit of God, descending like a dove and landing on him, ¹⁷and a voice out of the heavens said, “This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him.”

“Where do I fit in?” It’s a question that gets asked throughout life. We ask it when we walk into our preschool classroom and can’t understand why the teacher doesn’t give us as much one-on-one attention as mom at home. We ask it when we get to middle and high school, and we’re trying to figure out what social cliques we fit in or what makes us stand out from everybody else. We ask it when things get a little too stagnant in life and happiness transforms into crisis. And we ask it when we start recognizing more and more names in the newspaper obituaries. It’s especially that last one I want to talk about today. Not the growing old part, but the question that wonders where you and I fit in the scheme of eternity, no matter how old you are.

This week we had two funerals at Holy Cross. Lots of tears. Lots of goodbyes. The loss of loved ones causes us to think about these things, to wonder where we stand with our Creator. But Jesus makes identities obvious in his baptism, both his identity and ours too.

Jesus came to John the Baptist with a confusing request. He wanted John to baptize him. But John was confused: “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?” Everybody was coming out to the wilderness to hear this wild man with camel skin clothing preaching his message of repentance. And he was baptizing them with a baptism of repentance down in the Jordan River. You can picture what was spiritually happening here. These sinners were going down into the water to be cleansed, leaving their sins behind as they came back out of the river. But now Jesus wants to go down into that dirty sin water too?

John was right to have concerns about this. It doesn’t make sense that Jesus should want the same washing that all these sinners have received for their sins. John himself called Jesus the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” This was to be the lamb without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish. So why would he need to be baptized? Why would he desire to go down into this spiritually gross water contaminated by a sickness that was not his own?

John’s protest made sense, and Jesus showed how much sense it made by not disagreeing with John. But still he said, “Let it be so now, because it is proper for us to fulfill all

righteousness.” We’ll talk about his fulfilling of all righteousness in a few minutes. But let’s look at what happened next.

After his initial protest, John the Baptist gave in. Of course, the one who John himself claimed was greater than him would not hear any more refusal. Down into the water they went, and after Jesus’ baptism, something truly remarkable played out. Heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended from the sky in the form of a dove. And a voice boomed from heaven, the voice of the Father, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him.” Here, the Trinity is on full display, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It’s in this moment that Jesus became the Christ. And this is not to say that he was not God from eternity. This was not just some guy that God took possession of and made the Savior. The Son was true God from before time began. But the name Christ means “anointed one.” And here we see his anointing as Savior and the beginning of his work to rescue sinners.

Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One, the Savior. He comes with his Holy Spirit to bear the sins of the world, all the way to the cross where that Spirit will leave him as he sheds his blood for the sins of the world. He comes with the approval of the Father, identifying him as his ever-pleasing Son.

And understand: God is not saying he’s proud of his Son like you tell your son when he gets a base hit in tee ball or your daughter when she wins a ribbon at the fair. This pleasure comes from his Son being completely sinless and completely committed to the Father’s will, the plan to save sinners. Jesus’ baptism identifies him. It tells us who he is, the spotless Lamb of God, the God-man who took flesh to save the world.

But now, let’s talk about Jesus’ words: “to fulfill all righteousness.” Because he steps into the water not to fulfill some legal demand where God promised that the Savior would be baptized, but to step into our shoes and do what we never could. Christ lived the perfect life that we could not. Never once did he give in to temptation. Never once did he sin. We call that his active righteousness or active obedience, doing everything according to God’s will for us. And then he died. And it wasn’t something outside of his control. He chose to die. He willingly died. He laid down his life as that spotless Lamb of God led to the slaughter. This, we call his passive righteousness or passive obedience. He allowed death and hell to happen to him. He allowed the sins of the world to crush him under their weight.

And so, maybe you can imagine it this way. All these people – sinners each one – go down into the water. That water washes them clean of their sins and they come up pure and spotless. But all that dirty water has to be cleaned. So, Jesus goes down into the water, and he sponges all the dirty water up. He comes out of the water with a new mission: to carry all those sins with him all the way to the cross, through his perfect life – his active righteousness – and his sinless death – his passive righteousness. On this day the heavens opened and Jesus’ public ministry to

save sinners began. And Luther writes so poetically that because of this day – and all the days that followed – that heaven would never be shut.

Friends, your baptism does for you what you see Jesus doing for those who received John's baptism. You dirty the water with your sin, only to have Christ sponge it up and take it to the cross. Your baptism unites you with Christ, into his death and his resurrection. That means that in these waters your sins are washed, heaven opens to you, and the Holy Spirit makes a temple within your heart. And the voice of the Father also speaks; that Father that you have been disloyal to since you were conceived with original sin from Mom and Dad. And he tells you he's proud of you. He's proud of you, again not because you hit the ball or raised a healthy pig. He's not even proud of you because you've lived a perfect life. He's proud of you because of the great exchange that Jesus made with you. As Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians: "In fact, you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. Indeed, as many of you as were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is not Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for you are all one and the same in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants and heirs according to the promise."

But isn't this hard to believe? Your own baptism didn't have the same pomp as Jesus'. There was no sky rending above your head or a divine dove or a booming voice that filled the church from above. Just simple water on your skin. The voice of a pastor or parent. It's just too ordinary, isn't it? If God is going to mark us, shouldn't he do it in a way that stirs up all our emotions? Shouldn't he do it in a way where we can really feel the presence of the Holy Spirit? And isn't there too much promised here? Forgiveness? Life eternal? A clean conscience toward God?

This is sufficient, not because we feel it's sufficient, but because the Lord says it's sufficient. 1 Corinthians 1 says, "But God chose the foolish things of the world to put to shame those who are wise. God chose the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are strong, and God chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to do away with the things that are, so that no one may boast before God." God uses this simple act of applying simple water with the trinitarian formula, just a few words, to work a miracle that unites you with Christ in his death and resurrection. He gives you faith to trust that if he says this is enough, if he says you are his, you believe Jesus. You trust him, because his identity as your Savior is made so obvious here in Matthew chapter 3.

I want to close with Luther's Flood Prayer, a prayer which takes us back to our own baptisms and proves to be just as appropriate and comforting now as on the day we were first baptized. Let's pray:

Almighty and eternal God, according to your strict judgment you condemned the unbelieving world through the flood, yet according to your great mercy you preserved believing

Noah and his family, eight souls in all. You drowned hard-hearted Pharaoh and all his host in the Red Sea, yet led your people Israel through the water on dry ground, prefiguring this washing of your Holy Baptism. Through the Baptism in the Jordan of your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, you sanctified and instituted all waters to be a blessed flood, and a lavish washing away of sin. We pray that you would behold us all according to your boundless mercy and bless us with true faith by the Holy Spirit that through this saving flood all sin in us which has been inherited from Adam and which we ourselves have committed since would be drowned and die. Grant that we be kept safe and secure in the holy ark of the Christian Church, being separated from the multitude of unbelievers and serving your name at all times with a fervent spirit and a joyful hope, so that, with all believers in your promise, we would be declared worthy of eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.