

In the name of  Jesus.

The Epiphany of our Lord that we consider today is Jesus' baptism, surely a manifestation of His divinity. Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River by John, and the heavens open up, the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove comes down upon Jesus, and a voice from heaven speaks, informing us that Jesus is the Son of God, the Father's "*beloved Son, in whom [He is] well pleased.*" Indeed, more than just a manifestation of Jesus' divinity, all three persons of the Holy Trinity made an "appearance" today — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — a threefold epiphany.

But today we consider especially Jesus' baptism ... what it means and what it doesn't mean. What Jesus' baptism is not ... it is not Jesus' institution of Christian baptism. "As I have been baptized, so follow in my example of baptism." No!

You, who know your catechism well, know about baptism — what it is. "Baptism ... is the water included in God's command and combined with God's word." Christ commands it; He institutes it. "Which is that word of God? ¶ Christ our Lord says in the last chapter of Matthew [—not chapter 3 as in our Gospel, but the last chapter]: 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' (Matt. 28:19)" (Small Catechism, Baptism, Part 1). And He adds His words of promise to it. It's why we Lutherans cherish baptism so.

There is some obvious overlap of the two ... the application of water, the Trinitarian connection, the appearance in one and the recitation of the name in the other. John's baptism was "*for the forgiveness of sin*" (Mark 1:4), and Christian baptism does the same, it washes away our sins, as Ananias told Paul: "*Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name*" (Acts 22:16); and as Paul Himself would proclaim about baptism: Christ has "*cleansed [the church] by the washing of water with the word*" (Eph. 5:26).

But there are also some obvious differences. John was baptizing in the Jordan River, but there's no Christian requirement to be baptized there. In fact, there's nothing special about that water. The "*rivers of Damascus*" are just as good for Christian baptism as the Jordan (2 Ki. 5:12). But it doesn't even have to be done in a river, although the early Christian writing, the *Didache*, calls for "living," that is, "running" water; but other water will also do, it says. In fact, water out of our faucet works quite well for us. After all, the church has long proclaimed what Luther puts in his Flood prayer: "through the baptism of Your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, has consecrated and set apart the Jordan and all water as a salutary flood and a rich and full washing away for sins." That also means that the water need not be cold as the *Didache* also calls for. Warm water will do, and unless you want babies screaming in shock because they had cold water poured on them, I think we'll keep using warm water.

The big difference between Christian baptism and John's is that John's baptism was a “*baptism of repentance*” (Mark 1:4): John said, “*I baptize you with water for repentance.*” Even though we repent, rejecting the devil and all his works and all his ways, before being baptized, Christian baptism especially conveys God's grace.

But that brings up a nagging question in people's minds. “Why, then, did Jesus submit Himself to John's baptism? Jesus was the sinless Son of God. He had no need of forgiveness; He had nothing to repent!”

That's surely true, and John the Baptist himself recognized it. As Jesus presented Himself to John for baptism, John responded by trying to prevent it: “*I need to be baptized by you.*” Remember, John had just been preaching, “*I am not worthy to carry [Your sandals]*” (Matt. 3:11), and so he wonders “*do you come to me?*”

But the question about Jesus submitting to John's baptism seems odd to me. What did Jesus ever do that was not “for us men and for our salvation” (Nicene Creed)? I mean, why would Jesus submit Himself to the humility of “*being born in the likeness of men*” (Phil. 2:7)? Not for Himself, but for us men and for our salvation. Why would Jesus submit Himself to being “*born under the law*” (Gal. 4:4)? Not for Himself, but for us men and for our salvation. Why would Jesus submit Himself unto “*death, even death on a cross*” (Phil. 2:8)? Not for Himself, but for us men and for our salvation.

Jesus came as a servant! “[T]he Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Jesus' servanthood ended with His sacrifice on a cross, but it began at His baptism — an act of servanthood at the start of His ministry — that is, at the start of His work of service for us.

John was right ... he needed to be baptized by Jesus, but at this moment in time, Jesus said, He needed to be baptized by John — “*let it be so now,*” Jesus said, “*for [in this way] it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.*”

In what way? Not that He might show us the way of repentance ... not that He might be forgiven, but that He might identify first with sinful Israel coming out to be baptized by John, and by extension with us sinners. After all, it is “*all righteousness*” that Jesus fulfills. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, “*the LORD has laid on him — this suffering servant — the iniquity of us all*” (Isa. 53:6). Or, as St. Paul says, God “*made him to be sin who knew no sin,*” not for His sake, but “*[f]or our sake ... so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor. 5:21).

And the fulfillment that began at His baptism continued through Jesus' perfect keeping of the law, His righteousness being credited to us. And finally, it culminated in Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the cross — in this “*bloody baptism*” (Luke 12:50) Jesus stands in for us, as again Isaiah foretold: “*the righteous one, my servant, [shall] make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities*”

(Isa. 53:11). It's as we will soon sing: "This the baptism that our Savior Greatly longed to undergo; This the crimson cleansing needed So the world God's love might know; This the mission of Messiah As He stepped from Jordan's stream, He, the chosen and anointed Son of God, sent to redeem" (LSB404:3).

And how do we receive the benefits of Christ's redemption? How do we attain this righteousness? Here, we come full circle. Listen to St. Peter: "*Christ ... suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit ...*" (1 Pet. 3:18). Hmm. Dying with Christ (Col. 3:3), and being "*made alive together with him*" (Col. 2:13). That sounds a lot like Christian baptism, and in fact, that's how Peter continues. As Noah and family were saved through water, so "*[b]aptism ... now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ ...*" (1 Pet. 3:21).

That's how St. Paul talks, too. Even as Jesus by His baptism identified with us sinners, so now we by our baptisms get to identify with Him, the righteous One — more than that, we are actually united with Him. "*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. ¶ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*"

Yes, united with Jesus through baptism, we are now "*in him*" and have been granted the "*righteousness of God.*" Now, we too are beloved of God the Father for we have been incorporated into His beloved Son. When God looks at us, He looks not on our sins, but sees on us only the righteousness of Christ with which we have been clothed by the sacred washing of water and the word, and the Father thus says to us all, "you are my beloved children; with you I am well pleased."

Indeed, as children everywhere are glad when their earthly fathers delight in them; so may we be glad at our Father in heaven's delight in us through His Son. Rejoice, you baptized.

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