

Sermon Draft

Text: Matthew 3:13–17

Sermon: “The Gift of Baptism”

The Baptism of our Lord is a manifestation of Christ’s identity as the true Son of God, Redeemer of the world. He fulfills all righteousness in order to redeem his creation by taking on himself the sin of the world.

Leonard had been a loyal executive of the corporation for over twenty-five years. One of his strengths was his ability to work with a diverse population of employees from a variety of backgrounds. Leonard knew that for some employees this job was a second chance at success. Some had been incarcerated for petty theft and other minor offenses. Working closely with these individuals, Leonard was able to establish a foundation of trust and respect.

One of the employees, Bill, was experiencing financial difficulties, and he wasn’t able to resist the temptation to avail himself of sums of money from the petty cash account. When a corporate official visited, she conducted a quick assessment of office expenses, which she sensed were not in balance. Upon further investigation, she determined that Bill had stolen a considerable amount of cash.

The corporate official summoned Leonard and Bill into an office and presented the evidence of Bill's theft. She announced that Bill's employment was being terminated and local officials were being called to lodge charges. Leonard attempted to intervene on Bill's behalf, but the corporate official would not listen. Recognizing that satisfaction must be made for the loss of money and that someone had to suffer the consequences for Bill's actions, Leonard wrote a personal check covering the financial loss and volunteered to terminate his relationship with the corporation in place of Bill. Surprisingly, the corporate official was satisfied that justice had been served, and she reinstated Bill and bid Leonard farewell.

In the same way, at his Baptism, Jesus put himself in our place to fulfill all righteousness, taking upon himself the consequences of our sins, graciously purchasing for us a right relationship with our heavenly Father.

The significance of Jesus' Baptism for us is his identifying with us, putting himself in our place, so that in our Baptism we are put in his.

That's the point Paul applies in the Epistle: *“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”*

(Romans 6:3–5).

Luther stated, *“That is the mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners: wherein by a wonderful exchange our sins are no longer ours but Christ's and the righteousness of Christ not Christ's but ours. He has emptied himself of his righteousness that he might clothe us with it and fill us with it. And he has taken our evils upon himself that he might deliver us from them. . . . In the same manner as he grieved and suffered in our sins, and was confounded, in the same manner we rejoice and glory in his righteousness”* (Martin Luther, Werke [Weimar, 1883], 5:608).

This, in essence, is what Christ Jesus means for us giving us what is his, and taking upon himself what is ours. It's what he was accomplishing in every act of his ministry.

But there's a particular moment in which we first see this and see it most vividly. That's today, this First Sunday after the Epiphany, in the Baptism of our Lord in the Jordan River. Christ's Baptism begins a wonderful exchange which continues to bless us each day.

The wonderful exchange is begun at Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan. Christ intentionally seeks out his cousin John to be baptized (v 13). At this point, John is a well-known figure, with crowds of both followers and naysayers. Jesus is an unknown. But Jesus chooses to begin his ministry by becoming one of those who come to John humbly seeking Baptism.

John attempts to prevent the Baptism (v 14). John recognizes Jesus' sinlessness. Already in the womb, John had leaped for joy at Jesus' arrival. His mother had known that Jesus was her Lord (Luke 1:39–44). The Spirit would reveal to John that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29–34). John recognizes his own sinfulness his need to be baptized by Jesus. He knows that even his exemplary life, a life of simplicity, of denying himself all the pleasures we crave (living in the wilderness! eating locusts and wild honey!) does not make him righteous.

He can rightly decry the wickedness of Herod and his adultery, but he knows that he himself is just as deserving of God's fiery punishment. Christ joins sinners in the muddy Jordan to do what they were unable to do, to fulfill all righteousness (vs 15–17).

All of us, just like John, need forgiveness. For we all fall short of the glory of God, sinning daily in thought, word, and deed, sins of omission and commission. For all these sins, we all truly deserve the wrath of God. But Jesus here begins this wonderful exchange with sinners, fulfilling the Law in our place and taking upon himself God's judgment against sin.

The wonderful exchange is completed when Jesus dies on Calvary. The sinless One bears the sins of the world. What an exchange! He hangs there, bloody, and naked, for all the world to see and scorn, while we sit comfortably below. His rightful, eternal Sonship with the Father is disowned, so that the Father owns us as his beloved sons and daughters. Then . . . ***“It is finished”*** the exchange is complete! God ***“made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”*** (2 Corinthians 5:21).

We call this the vicarious atonement. Christ has made us one with the Father again by suffering in our place. Jesus' action, not ours, wins reconciliation with God for us, vicariously. The blessed exchange! Christ in our place, we in his.

The benefits of the wonderful exchange continue for us today. The blessings are given to us when we each receive the Sacrament of Baptism. Luther's great baptismal hymn beautifully interweaves the event of Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan with the event and meaning of our Baptism.

The same Spirit is present today in our Baptism as at Jesus' Baptism. Therefore, our sins are washed away. The forgiveness Christ brings is for the sins of yesterday, today and tomorrow. And in our Baptism, the Spirit builds in us the new person in Christ. That the new person is the daily significance of Baptism for each of us, as Luther explains so well in the catechism. (Quote "What does such baptizing with water indicate?")

By our Baptism, we daily drown the old Adam through contrition and repentance. By the forgiveness of our Baptism, a new man arises to live before God in righteousness and purity. The blessed exchange! We, our sins laid on Christ, now live the holy life of Christ. Our old self is drowned as we just heard, and a new self is born in the waters of Baptism. Therefore we are reminded to daily remember our Baptism.

It is in the Baptism of Jesus that we first see this wonderful exchange. Christ, God's beloved Son, takes our place so that in our Baptism we are beloved children of God. So, Baptism is where the exchange begins for us too. That's why the day of our Baptism can well be called our rebirthdays. Do you know your baptismal birthday, the date you were baptized? Find out, if you can and celebrate it with your family! Each year and every time we (make the sign of the cross) speak those words spoken at your Baptism: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen