

## **FOCUS: The Good News is we are made God's children in our baptism.**

Today is the festival of the Baptism of Our Lord. In the formative years of the church, we are told, the teachers, preachers, and leaders put a great deal of emphasis on the this event. Theologian Philip Pfatteicher, in his *Commentary on the Lutheran Book of Worship*, writes that the baptism of Jesus was seen as “a revelation of Jesus’ diving sonship—as we heard in the Gospel—the anointing and appointment of Jesus to his messianic office at the beginning of his public ministry, a declaration of Jesus’ solidarity with the sinful human race in undergoing baptism by John and a baptism of the water to give the element power to cleanse from sin.”<sup>1</sup> It comes on the first Sunday after Epiphany every year. This is an appropriate, since Epiphany is a season in which we pay particular attention to ways in which God is made manifest to the people through Jesus.

Why was Jesus baptized? This is a very common question by young and old alike. We preach, teach, and confess that we believe in “one baptism for the remission of sin,” and at the same time declare that Jesus was without sin. If Jesus had no sin, why was he baptized? One might say that Jesus being baptized is like a perfectly healthy person taking therapy for a deadly illness. But to view it this way, dear friends, is to trivialize the monumental event. Rather than being an unnecessary act, it shows how Jesus was obedient to God, as well as his solidarity with our sinful human condition.<sup>2</sup> Here, the starting line of Jesus’ ministry is crossed, and Jesus begins the journey of living, dying, and living again for us.

Our Gospel text is quite brief, but longer than the accounts offered by Mark and Luke. Next week, we will hear John the Evangelist’s record of this event in the context of John the Baptist bearing witness to the circumstances surrounding his baptism of Jesus. And in this account, it is not so much the actual baptism that draws our attention, but rather the events before and after. First, we hear John protest that it should be the other way around—that Jesus should baptize John, but Jesus will have none of that. Then, after being baptized by John, we have this miraculous event in which the skies opened up and the Spirit of God descended like a dove and landed on Jesus. With the Spirit came a voice reverberating from heaven. “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased!”<sup>3</sup> In this brief event, we find another epiphany—another time when God made himself known to human beings. Scholars aren’t certain who might have heard these words. Some suggest that, based on the accounts provided in the other Gospels, that no one really heard the words, but that they heard *something*, and that the voice was only audible to Jesus and, perhaps John the Baptist. In any case, we are provided with accounts that a voice from heaven declared unequivocally that Jesus was the Son of God.

In the Gospel, we hear Matthew report that the Spirit of God descended like a dove and landed on Jesus. This would be easily understood by Matthew’s Jewish audience, because the Hebrew Scriptures are full of examples comparing the Spirit of God to a dove. Scholars have for centuries speculated that the dove descending on Jesus, announcing deliverance from sins, was the New Testament equivalent of the dove in the story of the Flood announcing the deliverance from the flood. However, this might not be the best understanding.

If we carefully read Genesis 1:2, and look especially at the Hebrew text and the Talmudic commentaries on this well-known verse, we learn that the familiar “wind from God” or “spirit of God swept across the waters” described at the creation is much better translated or understood as the hovering of a dove.<sup>4</sup> With this understanding of the observations of Matthew in the context of the Hebrew Scriptures, the meaning becomes quite clear for us: The last things are just as the first things were, and so Jesus “inaugurates a new creation.”<sup>5</sup>

If we see the baptism of Jesus in an eschatological context—that is, as an event of the end times—how does it relate to the creation story? To understand this, we need to think in the context of the early

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<sup>1</sup> Pfatteicher, *Commentary on the Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1990), 217.

<sup>2</sup> *New Proclamation 2000* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1999), 91.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 3:17 (NRSV).

<sup>4</sup> *New Proclamation 2001-2002* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 88.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Christian community, particularly those who came from a Jewish background like Matthew's audience. In other parts of the New Testament, including First and Second Corinthians, Colossians, and, of course, Revelation, there are comparisons of the end times. In First Corinthians, we read that "the first man, Adam, became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit."<sup>6</sup> The last Adam, of course, is a common reference to Jesus. In Colossians we hear "[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created.... He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead...."<sup>7</sup> These passages, when brought together with the Old Testament image of the dove representing the Spirit of God, are designed to lead the first century Jewish listener of Matthew's gospel make a direct connection between the baptism of Jesus and the Genesis account of creation. It is shorthand, if you will, to the Jewish community that Jesus is the bringer of a new creation.

Human beings are born sinful beasts. There is nothing we can do about that fact. Even the most pious of us—those like Mother Teresa and John Paul II for example—are born sinful. The "Old Adam" and the "Old Eve" is in us from our conception. And, in our sinful state, there is no way in which we can enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Just as Adam and Eve were sent from the Garden, forever to be separated from Paradise, so too are we, sinners of God's own creation, eternally separated from Paradise.

Except for one little thing. We are *not* separated from God because of God's grace. In baptism, we are made children of God and coheirs with Christ. In baptism, our sins are forgiven and, as Luther says so frequently, the Old Adam—the Old Eve—in us drowns in the water of baptism and we are reborn as children of God. The Spirit of God settles upon us in our baptism, and we are sealed forever with the cross.

John baptized with water alone, and it was a baptism—a cleansing—of repentance. It was not a baptism by which sin would be—once and for all times—forgiven. Our baptism is different. We are baptized, just as John declared, not with water alone, but with the Spirit of God. Baptism is, as Luther wrote in 1528, not "a handful of water, which is no good, [but] that the Spirit, the Spirit must do it; the bathhouse servant, the minister, that is, effects nothing; therefore the Spirit should be present. But, you should say: baptism is water comprehended and sanctified in God's commandment and Word, that is, a divine and holy water because of God's commandment."<sup>8</sup>

Baptism is a sacrament of the church. We bring the ordinary element of water together with the Word of God to make it extraordinary. It is a sign of God's grace—God's undeserved, unrepayable love for the world. At the Ascension, Jesus commanded us to baptize all the nations. We are called to share this wonderful gift of grace with all people. And, since we are baptized but once, we come to the Table to partake in the bread and the wine that are the Body and Blood of Christ. Holy Communion is the other visible sign of God's grace. It is the Meal of the baptized, and all the baptized are welcome.

We have never seen the face of God. We await the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the meanwhile, we have the Spirit of God descending upon us like a dove. God has made himself known to us through the Son, and one way in which God reminds us of his abiding presence is through the dove.

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:48 (NRSV)

<sup>7</sup> Colossians 1:15-21 (NRSV)

<sup>8</sup> "Ten Sermons on the Catechism, 1528" *Luther's Works* 31:182