

“It’s the Right Thing to Do!”

Matthew 3:13-17; the Baptism of Our Lord

January 8, 2017

This past week I read about a young Lutheran pastor and his wife, newly married, who are serving their first church in North Dakota. Last Sunday, on the first Sunday of this New Year, they decided it best to leave their home for the church two hours earlier than usual! Why? Because the temperature in that part of our country was hovering just above zero and the pastor wanted to get there in plenty of time to bump up the thermostats in the Sunday school classrooms and sanctuary before any of the other bolder church members, defying the temperature, would begin to arrive! Why the wind and the snow were blowing so hard across the barren cornfields and soybean fields that it was difficult for the pastor to keep their little car on the road!

All of a sudden this is when the pastor’s wife turns to him and says: “Tom, I want you to know that if you weren’t the pastor, there’s no way I’d be going to church today!” To which Pastor Tom, in an attempt to console his wife replied, “Honey, I want you to know, that if I weren’t the pastor I wouldn’t be going to church today either!”

Brothers and sisters, have you ever stopped to think of all the times in our Christian lives, when our faith in the Triune God calls upon us to do something that we aren’t looking forward to at all, but we do it because our faith compels us to do it and deep down inside of ourselves, we know that “It is the right thing to do!”?

And isn’t this the very encouragement that even Jesus seek to give to John the Baptist at the hour of our own Lord’s Baptism in our Gospel lesson today! John the Baptist, who seemed to always have a willing-spirit to take on whatever task that the LORD God Almighty had assigned to him, by contrast here, certainly seems to be expressing some real reluctance on his part!

St Matthew tells us: *“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him, but John would have prevented him, saying: ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so for now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then John consented”* (Matthew 3:13-15). When you stop and think about it, isn’t our Lord’s reply: *“Let it be so for now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness!”* just another one of those Biblical ways of saying: “It’s the right thing to do!”?

For centuries now, on this First Sunday after the Epiphany, the Church around the world has celebrated the Baptism of our Lord because this event was considered to be one of utmost importance in our Lord’s whole life by those who were members of the early church!

Why was Jesus’ Baptism such an important event in our Lord’s life?

(I) First of all, it was important, because in Jesus’ stepping forward to be baptized by John, the 30 year-period of Jesus’ whole life up to this point lived out—in relative obscurity and seclusion in this world—was now coming to an end.

In three of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark and John, there is no mention of any of Jesus' childhood experiences at all! Only Luke tells us about that time when the twelve-year old Jesus went into the temple one day, when he had accompanied his parents to the city of Jerusalem for their annual celebration of the Passover: *"When there he was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him,"* St. Luke tells us, *"were amazed at the boy Jesus' understanding and of his answers"* (Luke 2:46-47).

Everyone who was there was excited at what was happening, except for Joseph and Mary, who had unfortunately become separated from their son for that long period of three days, when they had no idea at all where he might have been. No one probably would have ever expected to find their twelve year old son hanging out at the temple back in those days, any more than parents today might expect to find their twelve-year old son hanging out at the church in our day—if they somehow had become separated from him!

When Mary and Joseph did finally find Jesus hanging out at the temple, his Mother said to him: *"Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress"* (Luke 2:48)!

Was it possible, that momentarily at least, those words of the annunciation that the Angel Gabriel had spoken to the Virgin Mary some 12 plus years previous to this, had now slipped Mary's mind completely? You remember those words of the angel to Mary: *"You will conceive and bear in your womb a son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God"* (Luke 1:31-32)! We can't say for sure, but maybe this boy Jesus' jogged his Mother's mind---when he replied to her by saying: *"Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house"* (Luke 2:49)?

(2) **Secondly, the Baptism of our Lord was considered to be such an important moment in Jesus' life because here also, at long last, the One whose coming John the Baptist had been prophesying has indeed arrived.** The Holy Spirit had revealed this to John the Baptist, which prompts him to point to Jesus immediately and to call out in a voice loud enough for all other people there to hear: *"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (John 1:29)!

(3) **Thirdly, the Baptism of our Lord was considered to be of such importance—because here Jesus is, the totally sinless Son of God, taking his first public step to the cross!** Here Jesus is publicly accepting the will that his Heavenly Father had imposed on him—that St. Paul would later describe for us like this: *"For our sake, God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God!"*

Here Jesus was publicly identifying himself with all of us who are sinners! Here Jesus was taking our place as our Substitute under the law of God for us—to fulfill it perfectly on our behalf—so that when he would some three years later die on the cross—he would be dying there not for his sins but for ours!

Yes there are times, for us all so, when we also need to do things that our God is asking us to do—not because they are necessarily an easy to do, or because they have been on "own bucket list" for some time; you know, things that people say they are hoping to do before they "kick the bucket!" They need to do them because as this action was for both Jesus and John the Baptist, it was the right thing to do!

If you and I were asked one day to name out loud what we believe are some of the most dramatic events revealed to us in the Bible, it's highly possible that we wouldn't even think of writing down on our own personal lists anywhere – the Baptism of Our Lord – at all!

But that could happen, I believe, if are willing to take a closer look at those events revealed to us in our second-half of our Gospel lesson today?

St. Matthew tells us actually about three dramatic events that took place there along the banks of the Jordan River that day: (1) First of all, when Jesus was baptized Matthew tells us that *“the heavens were opened to him!”* (2) And secondly that *“the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove.”* (3) And thirdly that on the day of Jesus' Baptism is that there was then heard a voice from heaven that said these amazing words: *“This is my beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased!”* (Matthew 3: 16-17)!

In less than two weeks now, our President-elect, Donald Trump, will be sworn into office by one of the Chief Justice on the Supreme Court as the 45th President of the United States of America.

Regardless of whoever it is, however, who is being sworn in to accept that enormous responsibility, every four years, I have often sensed that many of those people, connected to those inauguration events—must strive awfully hard to put their own personal feelings aside—especially if they did not support or vote for the new president who is about to be sworn in on January 20th!

This must be especially true if the outgoing President of the United States is of a different political party, than the President-elect who is about to be sworn in! Certainly this was the case when the Republican President Dwight Eisenhower left the White House and the responsibilities of his job were then placed on the shoulders of the newly-elected President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, a Democrat. It must have been difficult when President Lyndon Baines Johnson, a Democrat then handed over the keys to the White House in 1968 to the newly-elected Republican President Richard Millhouse Nixon. Gerald Ford the Republican then had to hand over the job to Jimmy Carter a Democrat, even as Jimmy Carter then had to hand over the job to the newly-elected Republican President Ronald Regan; who probably didn't find it really all that difficult to hand over the job to the very man who had served him and our nation so faithfully as our Vice-President for the previous 8 years—the Republican President George Herbert Walker Bush; who had then the heartbreaking experience of having to turn over the job to President William Jefferson Clinton, a Democrat—who had the heartbreaking experience of then turning over the job to a Republican President George W. Bush, who then had the heart-breaking experience of turning over the job, eight years later, to another Democrat, President Barack Obama.

For all these past 240 years, the gauntlet has been peacefully passed from one president to another, though this certainly doesn't mean that this was ever an easy thing to do! Courageous people have done it—successfully now for 240 years—because it is the right thing to do—if our country's form of government is to remain one of a true democracy.

I don't think that things will really be all that much different this year, when the President-elect actually becomes the new president of the United States on January 20th. Nevertheless, most of us who witnessed on television President Obama welcoming President-elect Trump to the White House, only 2 or 3 days after a very hard-fought and bitter campaign was ended, didn't have to spend a lot of time analyzing their postures and the facial expressions—to realize—that where they were at—and what they were doing—was probably the last place they wanted to be and the last thing that either of them wanted to do! But both of them were there sitting there on easy chairs in the White House in a close range to each other – for one reason – and one reason only – because it was the right thing to do!

Sometimes the right thing to do is the hardest thing to do! That's how was for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ when he fell down prostrate on the ground in the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed out loud to the Heavenly Father three times, "*Father, if it be possible remove this cup from me!*" But then Jesus added, "*Not my will but yours be done!*"

For God to forgive us our sins and to grant us his eternal salvation as a free gift of his grace—was no easy task! But God did that, so that he might remain always true to himself—the Holy and Righteous God whose ways are always just—but also the Loving and Forgiving God whose primary name, St John reveals to us on numerous occasions is LOVE.

Brother and sisters we all know that there are some things in this life that are worth any price. How much would you take in exchange for your health, or for one of your children or for a sound mind? Even the greatest works of art, produced by the world's most renowned artists valued at millions of dollars, only have a relative value, don't they?

A Frenchman named Bernard Tristan who lived from 1866 to 1947, was a well-known play-write, journalist, and novelist who one day won first place in a newspaper competition sponsored by the publisher of that newspaper. Thousands of people sent in answers in response to the question: "If the Louvre were on fire and you could only take one painting with you, which one would it be?", Bernard Tristan's reply was, "The one nearest to the exit!" And can't we all sympathize with that!?! Amen