

What's the Big Deal About Baptism?

Mark 1:4-11

Epiphany 2 -- January 7, 2018

Calvin Coolidge became president of the United States in 1923, when as the Vice-President, his predecessor Warren G. Harding died most unexpectedly. Historians report that while President Coolidge was a very effective public speaker, that in his private life he was a man of very few words. He only spoke when he genuinely had something to say and he knew how to make every word count.

Humorously people said that he “knew how to be silent in five languages.” And there is even another story told by a matron who was one day seated right next to him at a special dinner in the White House. She said, “President Coolidge my father told me that if I could get you to speak more than two words that he would buy me a new gold watch!”

That's when the President, even without turning his eyes in this woman's direction, simply uttered two words: “You lose.”

My friends, St Mark who wrote the words of our Gospel lesson this morning, was also a man of few words! The very first picture he gives us of Jesus of Nazareth, is not a picture about some of the very unusual circumstances that surrounded our Savior's birth, as St Luke presents to us! Nor is it a picture of the Wise Men, following a star, all the way from what we know as the nation of Iraq today, to visit the Baby Jesus when he was 2 or 3 years old and a resident together with Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. Unlike Matthew and Luke who give us a couple of chapters upfront to get us used to who this special person is, the very first thing we hear or see about Jesus is when he stepped forward to be baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River.

Although each of the four Gospel writers believe this is such a highly significant event that they report it in each of their respective Gospels, once again, St. Mark's presentation of this event is by far the shortest. It only consists of 3 verses; verse 9, 10 and 11: *“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased!”*

So, what's the big deal about baptism? And what is there about Jesus' own baptism that in no time, it soon became the most highly-celebrated event in the whole season of Epiphany?

The Baptism of Jesus was regarded in the same way among the first Christians that you and I regard Christmas and Easter today.

What's the big deal about baptism? I am certain that through the Holy Scriptures that I could easily supply you with 5 or 6 answers to that question rather speedily. But in the interest of time--I would like to answer that question with only two words. The first word is AFFIRMATION and the second word is ASSURANCE. And the same is true for Jesus on the day of his baptism.

In Jesus' baptism, the Heavenly Father was certainly professing to his eternally-begotten and only-begotten Son that, to use a Southern euphemism, that he certainly was doing his Father proud. The baptism of Jesus was a day of glorious affirmation from his Father in heaven above.

Secondly, the baptism of Jesus was the Father's assurance being given to Jesus that he was headed in the right direction!

So often today, when people hold positions in this world of enormous responsibility, be they CEO's in the world of business and finance, or some high-level government officials, whenever any one of these high-ranking people become the targets of some type of special investigation, or place under the microscope of scrutiny--two very important questions are always asked: (1) WHAT DID HE KNOW; and (2) WHEN DID HE KNOW IT.

As we continue to meditate and contemplate upon this great doctrine of our faith that God became a flesh and blood human being in the Person of Jesus Christ, we do well also to pause at times and ask ourselves with respect to Jesus: (1) WHAT DID HE KNOW; and (2) WHEN DID HE KNOW IT.

I believe the way most of tend to think of Jesus is that he knew everything there was to know about his calling to become the Promised Savior of the world, right from the "get-go!" Some may think that even while the Baby Jesus was lying upon that manger bed of straw that he had a completely clear vision of everything that would happen to him in the future, but this is not necessarily the picture that the NEW TESTAMENT paints for us with respect to Jesus biography.

Let's not forget that the Book of Hebrews teaches us in Hebrews 4:14 that he was like us in every way, except for his being unlike us in the most important way--that he was without sin.

IF JESUS WAS AND IS FULLY HUMAN, WE CAN ASSUME THAT HE ALSO STRUGGLED AT TIMES WITH "NOT KNOWING" EVERYTHING ABOUT HIS IDENTITY AND HIS ULTIMATE DESTINY.

Even though our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was the WORD OF GOD MADE FLESH, AND although "ALL THINGS WERE MADE THROUGH HIM AND WITHOUT HIM WAS NOT ANYTHING MADE THAT HAS BEEN MADE," when he was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the

Virgin Mary--St. Paul makes it clear to us in the second chapter of Philippians, that Jesus set aside for a time many of his divine attributes and characteristics.

He was always God in human flesh, but listen to what St Paul says in **Philippians 2:5**, *“Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who even though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself and took on the form of a servant, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross!”*

We know very little about Jesus life from the time when he was born until the time when we meet him in our Gospel lesson today; though St. Luke who tells us he did some very careful research before he sat down to write his Gospel-account, even though he too was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Luke, most theologians believe, must have personally interviewed Mary the Blessed Mother of our Lord.

But Luke does tell us about two events. The first happened when Jesus was only 40 days old; when Mary and Joseph entered the temple in Jerusalem for Mary’s rite of purification. That’s when this rather savvy elderly gentleman named Simeon came up to Mary while she was holding the Baby Jesus in her arms: with those magnificent words of praise to God his Father in heaven above. For somehow the Holy Spirit had communicated to Simeon that he would not die until he saw with his very own eyes--the Promised Messiah. This is when Simeon approached the Baby Jesus snuggled safely in Mary’s arms with those unforgettable words: “Lord, now let your servant go in peace, your Word has been fulfilled, for my eyes have seen your salvation with you have revealed to all people--a light to enlighten the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel” (Luke 2:29-32).

The prophetess Anna, now 84 years old, marvels over the Baby Jesus too that day!

But there is only one more incident that the Bible shares with us about Jesus’ life until we come to our Gospel lesson today--and that is when he had gone up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover with Mary and Joseph and a great many other people from Nazareth when he was only 12 days old. Mary and Joseph had travel for a whole day when they were on their way back home, thinking Jesus was somewhere in the crowd, which they discovered wasn’t true.

They thought their 12-year old boy was lost, but he wasn’t lost at all. When they did find him, he was seated in the temple. Luke tells us: *“He was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and putting questions to them. Everyone who heard him was amazed by his understanding and his answers!”*

Yes Jesus, while in his human flesh, had all the divine powers available to him as his Father had in heaven, but he did not choose to make use of those powers--not he was totally without sin who had entered the world as one of us to make a VICARIOUS SATISFACTION FOR OUR SIN; He was offering his perfect life unto death on the cross to assume all the wrath of the Heavenly Father unto himself; wrath which all of humanity deserved instead. And on the third day God raised his Son from the dead to assure us that he accepted the sacrifice Christ made on our behalf!

Or how about what Jesus said, when it was the hour of his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane? When Peter pulled out his sword and lobbed off the ear of the high priest's servant's ear; the ear of a man named Malchus! Jesus told Peter to put away his sword, but followed that directive to Peter by saying: *"Do you not think that I can appeal to my Father and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels"* (Matthew 26:52-53)!

Before Pilate, he said, *"You would have no power over me, unless it had been given to you from above"* (John 17:11)!

Here on the day of Jesus baptism, he was receiving affirmation from the Heavenly Father that he most certainly was his only-begotten Son. And secondly, he was receiving the full assurance of his Heavenly Father that he was headed in the right direction!

And because of Christ and his sacrifice, doesn't the same thing happen for you and me? He calls us by name, he adopts us to be his very own children, who through the perfect sacrifice of his only-begotten Son he tells us that all of our sins are forgiven!

But secondly, he reminds us that our ultimate destiny and that the end of all things in your life and mine will not be that we simply end up in a hole someday 6 feet beneath the ground! No--he convinces that we too--are nothing less than the very heirs of eternal life.

We sing about that hope in so many, many of our hymns, don't we? But one of my favorites, that I as a small boy, was taught to sing by Sunday school teachers and parents was that 2nd verse of "Away in the Manger." They are words that touch the center of my heart and mind and I believe touch the center of your hearts and minds too!

"Be near me Lord Jesus I asked thee to stay; close by me forever and love me I pray! Bless all thy dear children in thy tender care. And take me to heaven to live with me there!"

Still in the Eastern Orthodox Churches still today--the BAPTISM OF JESUS REMAINS THE MOST IMPORTANT CELEBRATION THOUGHOUT THE WHOLE EPIPHANY SEASON.

You know for centuries many Christian were illiterate and would never have been able to read the Bible for themselves, even if they did have a copy of it in their homes. But this is why so many of the great cathedrals in Europe, and churches even in America today--have those beautiful stained-glass windows, as we do--to tell the story of Christ's epiphany--even to small children today.

In the Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox churches, these beautiful pictures were painted of different aspects of Jesus' life and ministry--that were called and are still called "ICONS." In all the icons portraying the baptism of Jesus, the JORDAN RIVER is always painted I learned recently black. It was black because of all the sins of the people that had been washed away from them in their repenting of their sins, so that when the sinless, spotless Lamb of God enters those black waters--it was then--that he absorbed into himself all the sin of humanity, that when he was crucified, sin was put to death with him, crucified with him on the cross. When he was buried all our sin, was buried with him, so that in his resurrection we too, now, might be clothes with nothing less that the very righteousness of Jesus Christ!

Paul says in I Cor. 5:21, "God made him to be sin for us who knew no sin so that we might become the righteousness of God through him." Peter says, "He himself bore our sins in his body unto death on a tree, that we might die to sin and live to God!"

May God grant this to us again this day--reminding us that in our baptism--we receive a new identity--that of our now being his children. And secondly, we receive a new destiny--life everlasting with him in heaven above!

"Be near me, Lord Jesus I ask thee to stay, close by me forever and love me I pray. Bless all thy dear children in thy tender care and take us to heaven to live with thee there!" Amen