

**“HOLY BAPTISM—A GROWING APPRECIATION”**  
**Luke 3:15-16, 18, 21-22; Baptism of Our Lord, Jan 20, 2016**

LET’S FACE IT: THERE ARE MANY THINGS THAT ARE IMPORTANT AND VALUABLE TO US IN THIS LIFE THAT WE ALL MAY TAKE EASILY FOR GRANTED; ESPECIALLY WHEN WE ARE YOUNGER! But hopefully, as we grow and mature, we also learn TO GROW IN OUR APPRECIATION for those important things we once took for granted.

Some people, for example, learn to grow in their appreciation of the SIMPLE THINGS in this life! They like to sing with Julie Andrews: “Raindrops and roses and whiskers on kitten, bright copper kettles and warm wooly mittens, brown paper pages tied up with strings, these are a few of my favorite things!”

Others may grow in their APPRECIATION OF NATURE. They like to sing with the hymn-writer: “When through the woods and forest glades I wander and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees; when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur and see the brook and feel the gentle breeze, then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art! How great thou art!”

Some people grow more APPRECIATIVE OF THEIR PARENTS, who always lived responsible lives and who taught them how to live responsibly too. Other people may grow in their APPRECIATION OF THEIR CHILDREN, especially in their twilight years and their children are caring for them with a great deal of love and devotion! People may grow in their APPRECIATION OF THEIR OWN PERSONAL SENSE OF WELLBEING. They may say: “If you have your help, you have just about everything!” But how many of us, as believers, if the truth be told, really do learn to become FAR MORE APPRECIATIVE OF OUR BAPTISM as the years roll on?

Unfortunately, when it comes to Holy Baptism some Christians may even adopt a rather **careless and cavalier attitude** towards it; that you can either **“take it or leave it!”** They can become very indifferent with respect to their baptism. Some people even go so far as to ask: “WHAT THE BIG DEAL ABOUT BAPTISM ANYWAY?” And of course this maybe would have some merit IF BAPTISM WAS OUR OWN IDEA, BUT IT ISN’T OUR OWN IDEA. IT’S GOD’S IDEA AND FOR HIM IT IS ALWAYS A BIG DEAL.

It certainly was a **big deal in Jerusalem on that first day of Pentecost.** Following Peter’s bold proclamation of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesu Christ, St. Luke tells us in ACTS 2:41, “THAT WHO RECEIVED PETER’S WORD WERE BAPTIZED, AND THERE WERE ADDED THAT DAY ABOUT 3000 SOULS!”

As you read on through the book of Acts, you see the Apostle Philip baptizing an ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH on the road to Azotus, who was a **court official of Candace, the Queen of the Ethiopians.** They were both riding in a chariot and as soon as they came upon some type of body of water that the eunuch questioned Philip saying: “SEE HERE IS WATER! WHAT PREVENTS ME FROM BEING BAPTIZED!?” AND PHILIP JUMPED OUT AND BAPTIZED THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH IMMEDIATELY!”

And we read in ACTS 16 THAT ST. PAUL BAPTIZED THE WHOLE HOUSEHOLD OF THE JAILER IN PHILIPPI and again IN ACTS 18:8 we read the same report that: “CRISPUS, A SYNAGOGUE RULER, AND HIS ENTIRE HOUSEHOLD BELIEVED IN THE LORD AND THAT MANY OF THE CORINTHIANS WHO HEARD PAUL PREACH THE GOSPEL WERE ALSO BAPTIZED; well how in the world then how can we ever take the attitude that HOLY BAPTISM JUST ISN’T THAT BIG OF A DEAL!?”

In the words of our Gospel lesson today, St. Luke tells us: **“As people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ; John answered them all by saying, ‘I am not! I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire!’”**

**It is no doubt some time shortly after this, Luke says: “When all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, that the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well-pleased!’”** Friends, as we are gathered together this morning to celebrate the Baptism of our Lord this morning I am

hoping we might take some time to address three important questions. **First of all (1). Where did Jesus' baptism take place? (2). Secondly, what does it signify? And (3). Thirdly, what implications might it hold for us in our lives?**

## **I. SO WHERE DID IT TAKE PLACE**

Where did it take place? It took place, of course, in the Jordan River—but LET'S REMEMBER THAT THE JORDAN RIVER IS NOT JUST ANY OLD RIVER. The Jordan is where Joshua brought the children of Israel into the Promised Land. The Jordan is where Israel, at long last, was now finally going to leave behind them, hopefully, all of those haunting memories of those last 40 years of their wilderness wanderings, including all of the temptations that had plagued them and the many sins they had committed there that all sprang forth from their lack of true faith and trust in the living God!

THEIR CROSSING OVER THE JORDAN RIVER INTO THE PROMISED LAND WAS TO ALSO TO BECOME A DAY WHEN THEY COULD FINALLY DRAW THE CURTAIN COMPLETELY CLOSED NOW ON THOSE 400 YEARS OF cruel mistreatment and in justice, which their ancestors had spent as slaves in Egypt. It was to signal a **WHOLE NEW BEGINNING FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD.**

But there is no way that they could actually enter the Promised Land without getting "baptized" first; and by this I mean that they had TO PASS THROUGH THE WATERS OF THE JORDAN TO EMERGE AS COMPLETELY BRAND NEW AND DIFFERENT PEOPLE ON THE OTHER SIDE!

Friends, each of the Gospel writers highlights a special aspect of the Baptism of our Lord that we are celebrating today. **St. Luke, for example, is the only evangelist** who tells us in our Gospel lesson today that it was "*while Jesus was praying,*" that the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove, and that the voice of the Heavenly Father gave that powerful affirmation to his only-begotten Son: "*You are my beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased!*"

Just as the crossing of the River Jordan over into the Promised Land was the beginning of a whole new life for the children of Israel, Jesus was now closing the door on his private life and beginning his public ministry through the act of his own Baptism, for the Baptism of Jesus beautifully links the story of the Old Testament together with the story of the New Testament; even as it provides a powerful connector for us between Israel's story and Jesus' story. So having said this:

## **II. WHAT DOES IT SIGNIFY FOR US?**

What it signifies for us, is the beginning of a whole new creation! And we can see this primarily through the Holy Spirit that descends upon Jesus, Luke tells us, in bodily form as a dove.

Why how in the world can we possibly read these words of our Gospel lesson this morning and not think about the opening verses of the entire Bible back in **GENESIS CHAPTER 1:1-2**? There we read: "*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters!*"

**"Hovering"** – this is something that a dove does, doesn't it? And this isn't the only place where the Holy Spirit is pictured to us in the Bible as a dove!

Because the Holy Spirit, as the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, is just that—spirit—in that he is not normally visible to us, on the occasion of Jesus' baptism, however, the Spirit took on a visible appearance and was no doubt seen by the people who were there that day also. The dove, even according to Jesus in **Matthew 10:16**, is the very emblem of purity and harmlessness—and the form of the dove at Jesus' baptism signified that the Spirit with Jesus was endowed was one of holiness and innocence!

**But there is another important time in the Bible when a dove becomes a powerful symbol of God's peace toward humankind, and this comes to us in the account of Noah and his ark and that worldwide flood that we read about in Genesis chapters 6-8.** When the earth had been covered with water for some time, Noah wanted to check to

see if there was any dry land out there anywhere, so he sent out a dove from the ark. **The first time he did so the dove came back with an empty beak! But the second time he did so the dove came back with an olive branch in her beak (Genesis 8:11).** SINCE THAT TIME THE OLIVE BRANCH HAS BECOME A POWERFUL SYMBOL OF PEACE.

IT WAS SHORTLY AFTER THIS THAT GOD PUT THE RAINBOW INTO THE SKY TO STRENGTHEN HIS PROMISE THAT HE WOULD NEVER DESTROY THE EARTH IN THIS FASHION EVER AGAIN. Which from a human vantage point could have presented problems because there was still sin in the hearts of those 8 people who survived.

We read throughout the Old Testament narrative how God intervened in history...calling his people to faithfulness. In Genesis 12 we read how God called Abraham to be the first Patriarch and promised that one day through him all the nations (families) of the earth would one day be blessed. But not long after this there was the problem of Sodom and Gomorrah.

God established a new covenant with his people whom he had rescued from 400 years of slavery in Egypt, through Moses at Mount Sinai. But the people melted down all their gold and built the Golden Calf—imagine that! Worshiping a god of your own making, like we are not tempted to do so today? To find our greatest sense of security in our money, our investments, stock markets and bonds. Sometimes people find their greatest sense of security their education, their professions, their insurance policies or their own hard work!

God gave his people the judges. Then the kings! After David and Solomon most of the kings were immoral and unjust men, though there was occasionally a king like Josiah. God sent the prophets, but his people persecuted, killed and stoned the prophets.

Jesus tells us how God said, “I know what I will do, I will send my only-begotten Son among them and surely they will listen to my Son; but they killed the Son too!”

And all of this was God’s plan to save all of us from our sins. God made him to be sin for us who knew no sin so that we might become the righteousness of God through him (2 Cor. 5:21).

### **III. So thirdly, what are the great implications of Jesus’ Baptism for you and me?**

At the precise moment when Jesus was praying and the heavens opened and the Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove, a voice came from heaven, **“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well-pleased!” (Luke 3:21-22)**

I want you to know that there is only place in the whole Old Testament where these two words are used together, those two words: **“Beloved son.”** It’s not in Isaiah. It’s not in the Psalms and it’s not in the Song of Songs. It’s found in Genesis 22:2, at that place that Dr. Samuel Wells, who was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University in 2008, identified in one of his sermons (rather subjectively, I might add) as “the scariest place of the whole Old Testament that sends shivers up and down its spine,” meaning the spine of the Old Testament. This is that moment when God calls on Abraham to take Isaac to Mount Moriah and to sacrifice him there! God says to Abraham, **“Take your son, YOUR BELOVED SON, ISAAC, and go to Mount Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering.”**

As horrendously difficult as it must have been Abraham to do that, Abraham obeyed and was actually at the very point of killing his son when God intervened and offered a ram instead. **And Christians have long seen Jesus as that son but also as the very Lamb of God whose sacrifice of his innocent life unto death on the cross has saved us completely from all of our sins. And we receive these foreshadowing of the cross, once again, at the very moment of the Baptism of our Lord.**

So often the call of God to every one of us throughout the pages of the New Testament is for us to continue to grow always in appreciation of our own baptism; our baptism that should always remind us, Paul teaches us in our epistle lesson today from Romans 6:1-11, that Jesus Christ did not die upon the cross so that we could continue to live those old lives completely dominated by sin, and the devil’s constant manipulations, but so that we might walk in newness of life with him.

Don't you love that last verse in which Paul sums up for us to a large degree the daily significance that should always be there for every one of us with respect to our baptisms? ***"For the death Christ died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God!" (Romans 6:10-11).***

In the Book of Acts, adults are baptized after coming to faith, but obviously their children were baptized too, because the book of Acts tells us on more than one occasion that the whole households of the people who became Christians as adults were baptized too—including servants perhaps, and hired hands, but most definitely children.

**For adults who desire to be baptized in the church today, this still holds true. Come to faith first (repent; turn back to God), then be baptized to mark the conversion and to be cleansed of all sin.** An infant certainly cannot deduce that Jesus is Savior and Lord, or believe in him. Yet for infants and children, a public statement of faith is not a requirement for baptism. So instead, parents or sponsors and the church speak on behalf of the infant regarding faith. -- **But if infant baptism is nothing more than something we do one day for the sake of family tradition or because we just think it's the "right thing to do" and then forget about it - it loses significance and is a hollow ceremony.**

Baptism is not and never was meant to be an end in itself! It's merely a starting point. It is the planting of the seed of faith, which will hopefully be nurtured through the proclamation of the Gospel over the days, months, and years to come, hopefully by the child's parents, Sunday school teachers, sponsors and the whole church. Eventually, when the time is right, parents will bring their church to be further instructed in the Christian faith by faithful pastors, who in the Lutheran Church still use the Small Catechism as the proper outline for all of these discussions.

Luther asks us in his Small Catechism: "What benefits does baptism give?" The he answers: "It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare!"

Which are these words and promises of God? "Christ our Lord says in the last chapter of Mark: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned!"

Lisa and I were watching the morning show on CBS this past Friday morning and it talked about the fact that 44% of people in this country who win a big amount of money in a state lottery somewhere throughout our nation have lost their whole fortune within the short span of five years. And for those who do retain at least a portion of it, they often become the objects of other people constantly hitting up for a handout or for a loan. For many people, winning the lottery, and winning it in a big fashion, does not always enhance their personal lives with respect to the future, or the personal lives of their loved ones.

When I hear statistics like this I find myself break forth in singing what has always been one of my very favorite hymns; the words to which go like this:

**All depends on our possessing, God's abundant grace and blessing, though all earthly wealth depart.  
They who trust with faith unshaken by their God are not forsake and will keep a dauntless heart.**

**Many spend their lives in fretting over trifles and in getting things that have no solid ground.  
I shall strive to win that will bring me lasting please and that now is seldom found.**

**If my days on earth he lengthen, God my weary soul will strengthen. All my hope in him I place.  
Earthly wealth is not abiding. Like a stream away is gliding; safe, I anchor in his grace! (LSB 732:1, 3, 6)**