

Baptism of our Lord

Baptism is for sinners. It's a spiritual washing of the stain of sin. Not the removal of dirt from the body like a bath, but a washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Baptism deals with sin. John called his baptism a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." So what in the world is Jesus doing being baptized by cousin John?

What's going on here, that the sinless Son of God in the flesh should be treated like a sinner? That's precisely what's going on here! The sinless Son of God in the flesh is being treated like a sinner. He became our sin. He absorbs our sin into His own sinless flesh in order to put sin to death in the flesh.

Luke tells us that Jesus was about thirty years old when He was baptized - the minimum age of ordination for a rabbi. Before that, you sat quietly at the feet of your teachers. In a sense, Jesus' baptism was His ordination for ministry, the public inauguration of His ministry, with the Spirit descending and the Father testifying. Now the whole world knows the fact. This man who grew up in obscurity in Nazareth, is the eternal Son of God and the Christ, the anointed One.

Matthew tells us that John initially objected when He saw Jesus standing there in the water. "I should be baptized by you, and yet you come to me." John was right. John's objection is at the heart of all religion. Religion teaches us that we are supposed to come to God, do as God commands, the lesser serves the greater. God needs to be appeased, buttered up, bribed, flattered, bargained with. You control the religious strings, you call the shots, you make the decisions that affect your salvation. It tidy, rational, terribly tempting. And deadly wrong.

Jesus comes to John to be baptized. The Greater comes to the lesser, the one who isn't worthy to tie his shoes. Jesus deigns to be treated as a sinner. He stands in solidarity with the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the sinners - those the religious looked down upon. The religious refused John's baptism. For what did they need to repent? They were solid church people. Who needs repentance when you're well on your way on your own? Yet here is Jesus in the water with sinners, one with them, immersing Himself into a sinner's baptism.

If you are going to rescue someone who is drowning, you're going to have to dive into the water. If you're going to rescue someone from a burning building, you have to enter the building. If you're going to rescue sinners from death, you're going to have to join them in their death. That's what Jesus, the sinless Son of God in the flesh is doing when He is baptized. He is joining us in our death, absorbing our sin, taking up all that has gone wrong with us like a sponge soaking up water. God is with us.

It works the other way too. Baptism unites us with Jesus in His death. Or don't you know "that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?" His baptism paves the way for our baptism, Holy Baptism. In His baptism, He took up our sin and death; in Holy Baptism we receive His sinless perfection and life.

Luther says that: "No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn body and soul than Baptism, for through it we obtain perfect holiness and salvation, which no other kind of life and no other work on earth can acquire" (LC IV: 46).

Some belittle the importance of baptism relegating it to a nice ceremony that we do. Scripture says different. Baptism is kind of a big deal. And it makes all those who are baptized kind of a big deal. No less than a beloved child of God, an heir of eternal life and a citizen of heaven.

Amen.

Prayer for Bea Aho's brother died

Ulla's friend Jim Price