

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Baptism of the Lord  
Sunday, January 8, 2023**

**“Fulfill All Righteousness”  
Matthew 3:13-17**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

Why was Jesus baptized? Today, on Baptism of the Lord Sunday, an important question to ask is, well, why *was there* a “Baptism of the Lord”? Why was Jesus baptized in the first place? And this morning, our Gospel Lesson opens with that very question, posed by none other than John the Baptist. Matthew writes: “Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” (vv. 13-14).

“John was as surprised as we are[, o]r at least, as we should be” (Wright), that Jesus came to him to be baptized. And so John balks at the request, “object[ing], ‘I’m the one who needs to be baptized, not *you!*’ (Peterson). The original language is quite strong here (δικακωλύω): John wanted to “forbid” Jesus from being baptized (Marshall). And I think we should pay attention to John’s objections, not least because he’s sort of our resident expert on baptism. This is John *the Baptist*, right; baptism is kind of his thing.

And really, doesn’t John have a point? Why *would* Jesus be baptized? After all, how would anything we associate with baptism apply to Jesus? Baptism is a sign and witness that we are united to Christ, that our sins are washed away by a forgiving God, that God bestows on us our identity as God’s children, that we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit; so why would Jesus need any of this? And it’s all the more bewildering to John the Baptist, since—in John’s ministry—baptism was, it seems, primarily about repentance and the forgiveness of sins (cf. Miller). So why would Jesus, the sinless one, the Saviour whom John awaited—why would Jesus need, or even be willing, to be baptized? It’s a question our next hymn asks, too—reflecting on the strangeness of Jesus entering the waters of baptism: “What king would wade through murky streams and bow beneath the wave, ignoring how the world esteems the powerful and brave?” (Troeger).

So again, why was Jesus baptized? In our Gospel Lesson, John asks the question—and Jesus responds: “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness [δικαιοσύνη].’ Then [John] consented” (v. 15). Jesus answers that, somehow, in being baptized, this will “fulfill all righteousness”; yet that response invites more questions... What exactly does that mean? How would it “fulfill all righteousness” for Jesus to enter into a baptism that—as far as John could see, and maybe as far as we can see—Jesus didn’t need? In what way was righteousness fulfilled by Jesus entering the waters of baptism?

Now, the baptism of Jesus signals the beginning of his ministry; all the stories of Jesus teaching and healing and revealing God’s love, all this begins with his baptism. And so, at this moment, in the baptismal waters, Jesus begins a ministry of compassion shaped profoundly by what has been called “the wonderful exchange” (*mirifica commutatio*). In his life and death and new life, Jesus took upon himself our brokenness and dying in such a way that he could give to us his healing and life. In this “wonderful exchange,” what was mortal became Christ’s and what was divine became ours.

John Calvin, a sixteenth-century Reformer, he explained it like this: “This is the wonderful exchange,” he wrote, “which, out of his measureless benevolence, [God] has made with us; [...] that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that,

accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; [...] that, [by] taking the weight of our iniquity [...] upon himself, he has clothed us with his righteousness” (IV.17.2).

And in this “wonderful exchange” which, out of kindness, God enacted in Christ—in this “wonderful exchange,” God revealed God’s unfailing solidarity with us and with all humankind. In Christ, God takes upon Godself all our weakness, all our brokenness, all our fears, in such a way that all these become Christ’s to bear for us. As St. Paul puts it, “For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

And this is precisely what unfolds in the baptism of the Lord; in Christ’s baptism we see revealed the “wonderful exchange,” as Christ is baptized not for his needs but for ours. Jesus “identifies himself” with us (Wright), accepts baptism in “solidarity” with us (Hare), and “consecrat[es] himself to his vocation by joining [us] in the waters of the Jordan” (Hare). For our sake, the sinless one, who needs no forgiveness, is baptized for the remission of sins; for our sake, the one who brings healing is baptized like one who needs to be healed: in these waters, Jesus takes upon himself our brokenness so that, in this baptism, we may be the ones made whole.

John Calvin, that Reformer I quoted before, he explained it like this: “our faith receives from baptism the [...] sure testimony to us that we are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united to Christ that we become sharers in all his blessings. For [Christ] dedicated and sanctified baptism in his own body [Matt. 3:13] in order that he might have [this baptism] in common with us as the firmest bond of the union and fellowship which he has deigned to form with us” (IV.15.5). In other words, Jesus was baptized so that—in *our* baptism—we would discover this unshakeable unity and fellowship with Christ. As we’ll sing in our next hymn: “Come bow beneath the flowing wave. Christ stands here at your side and raises you as from the grave God raised the crucified” (Troeger).

Whenever I baptize an infant or an older child or an adult, I always offer these words from a French Reformed liturgy. I address the one being baptized directly, by name, whether infant or adult, and I declare:  
“for you Jesus Christ came at Bethlehem;  
for you he lived and showed God’s love;  
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary  
and cried at the last, ‘It is finished’;  
for you he triumphed over death  
and rose to newness of life;  
for you he ascended to God’s right hand.  
All this he did for you,  
before you knew anything of it.  
And so the Scripture is fulfilled:  
‘We love, because God first loved us.’”

So once more, our question: why was Jesus baptized? Why? For you. Jesus was baptized for you. Baptism of the Lord Sunday is “a time to contemplate both Jesus’ baptism and our own” (Driver)—but today, as we reflect on the strangeness of Jesus’ baptism, we’re able to reimagine our own baptism in light of his baptism. And we discover that our baptism is meaningful and powerful precisely because Jesus was baptized first for us; that in our baptism, we follow Christ through the waters of his baptism, and—by sharing with Christ in baptism—we share also in the blessings and promise of the baptism of the Lord.

Now here’s how Matthew describes what happened as Jesus was baptized: “when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were

opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (vv. 16-17). And all this was for your sake: Jesus was baptized not for the forgiveness of his sin, but for ours; he was baptized not for his sake, but for ours. This was for you.

And so, on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, as we recognize that our baptism is a sharing in Christ’s, that the Lord was baptized for our sake, that all this reveals the “the wonderful exchange” for our redemption—we’re enabled to hear the story of Christ’s baptism as the story of *our* baptism. Therefore listen again to the baptism of the Lord, this time recognizing that—in every sense—this was for you: “And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to [you] and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on [you]. And a voice from heaven said, ‘[You are God’s child], [God’s] Beloved, with whom [God is] well pleased.’” Amen.