

*Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. <sup>14</sup> But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”*

*<sup>15</sup> Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.*

*<sup>16</sup> As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Mathew 3:13-17)*

### Why Was Jesus Baptized?

Why do you take a bath? To get clean, right? Sometimes, you might take a bath because you want to relax, but the basic reason that baths were invented is that people get dirty. The best way to get rid of that dirt is applying water to it – with a little soap or shampoo, right? Of course, today, we bathe far more often than people did in the past. But for as long as man has existed on this planet, bathing has been the obvious way of getting rid of our daily dirt. God picked up on that reality when he gave us holy baptism. Just as water and soap wash away the dirt and sweat that we pick up as we go about our day, water and the word make us clean, too. Not physically, but spiritually. God gave us baptism to wash our sins away. God gave us baptism because each and every one of us is born filthy, covered with the grim of sin. We are born sinners and rebels against God. Every single day, we pick up more grim and sin. But God gave us baptism to wash it all away. He made us clean. This morning, we’re considering Jesus’ baptism. But Jesus didn’t have any sin to wash away. Yet, he was still baptized. In fact he insisted on it. Why? **Why was Jesus baptized?**

#### I.

That’s the question we need to consider this morning for the simple reason that the Bible links our baptism to Jesus – to his death and his resurrection. Our baptism joins us to Christ when he died and when he rose, so we need to understand this morning what he was doing when he was baptized. You heard Matthew’s account of that baptism. It took place before anybody knew who Jesus was. John the Baptist might have been the only person there who knew him. John was the famous one at this moment. He had begun to preach and baptize and the people of Jerusalem were so excited about him that the city practically emptied out as the population made the long, hot journey down the mountain to the Jordan River. On the day he came to be baptized, Jesus seemed like just another one of thousands of people who coming for that same reason.

Of course, he wasn’t just one of thousands. He was the Son of God. But he was only one of us because God the Son became a real man. He did that for a reason: so that he could take our place. That’s the point of that conversation Jesus and John had. John knew who Jesus was. He knew what baptism means – God washes our sins away. So when Jesus came to him, John didn’t see a need to baptize him.

In fact, he didn’t really feel like he could because John knew that he himself was a sinner. I’ve had the privilege of baptizing lots of people. I’ve baptized adults, even adults on their death bed. I’ve baptized children from almost every age in this school up to and including an 8<sup>th</sup> grader on her confirmation day. Of course, I’ve baptized lots of babies. And I never worried about whether it was OK for me to do that, because I always knew they were sinners, whatever age they were. But if I had been in John’s shoes and Jesus had asked me to baptize him, I might not feel worthy of pouring water and the word on the head of the only sinless person who has ever lived. I might wonder, like John did, why? What’s the point if you don’t have any sins to wash away?

Jesus answered, “**Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.**” Now what does that mean? It does not mean that baptizing is something we do to earn righteousness. It’s not something we do to show our dedication to God. It’s not something that God requires as a commandment that we must fulfill. Jesus did fulfill all the commandments God gives. He even fulfilled all those Old Testament laws that don’t apply to us anymore, like the law against eating pork or doing any work on Saturday. But there was no Old Testament law that required baptism. Jesus didn’t even have the great commission yet where he told us to baptize. So what does this mean? Very simply, it means that it was part of God’s plan that John the Baptist would baptize Jesus Christ. Both John and Jesus needed to do what God wanted them to do on this day.

Notice: Jesus needed to do what God the Father wanted him to do. God wanted him to replace our sinful lives with his holy life. So at this moment, Jesus presented himself to John the Baptist as a sinner in need of God's grace. He didn't do that for himself – he had no sin. He did that for us. When he went into the water, when he asked for and insisted on and received the sacrament of holy baptism, he was standing in our place. Luther says that at this moment he became the Christ. What he means is that Jesus had to replace every sinner who ever lived. He had to be perfect and fulfill all that God's law required of us. And in fact, in a sense, he had to become the only sinner that God recognized, he had to become a world of sinners by himself, so that God could pour his wrath over sin out on Jesus' head instead of on our heads. In his baptism, Jesus publicly showed that he accepted that role. That he was willing to stand in our place.

Only a real human being could do that because God's law applies to us human beings. So that's what Jesus became. But only the Son of God could do it for everyone who ever has lived or who ever will live. Only the Son of God could do it so perfectly that God would be satisfied with his life and death. That's what he showed himself to be at this moment, the Son of God who became man to take our place. **Jesus was baptized because he stands in our place.**

## II.

Jesus was perfect for us, so he took our bath, even though he didn't need it. When that bath was done, God the Father and God the Holy Spirit underlined for us who he was and what all this means. As Jesus was stepping onto the bank of the Jordan, the Father called him his Son and heaven was opened and Jesus saw the Holy Spirit descending on him in the form of a dove. In the book of Acts, Peter tells us what this means: God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit.

Anointing is one of those things like animal sacrifices that is not part of New Testament worship but was part of the Old Testament worship system that God gave at Mt. Sinai. God commanded that prophets, priests and kings be anointed. They fulfilled the command by pouring oil on the man's head. That oil symbolized the Holy Spirit coming on that person and giving them the gifts they needed to do the job God was calling them to do. Anointing was God's way of saying, "This is the person I am calling." You probably already know this, but the word Christ means the Anointed One. It means the called one, the chosen one, the one God has sent to do his work. And all the Old Testament anointed ones were really pictures of the one great Christ that God would send to fulfill his work for us.

But Jesus was not anointed with oil. He didn't need a picture of the Holy Spirit coming on him. God sent the real Holy Spirit – in the form of a dove – to rest on Jesus and to fill him with the gifts of ministry that he needed. Why did God do that? I mean, Jesus is the Son of God. He already was one with the Holy Spirit in the Trinity. And even as a man Jesus already had the Holy Spirit in the same sense that we do: the Holy Spirit gave us faith and he now lives in our hearts. Jesus had faith – he trusted in God the Father. In fact, his faith was perfect, so the Holy Spirit certainly lived in his human heart. So why give him again like this?

Because Jesus wasn't just a private citizen in God's kingdom. God called him to be the Savior – to do the greatest work any human being ever did. When God sent the Holy Spirit to anoint him, he was installing him into his office, just as you have installed me and all the teachers who serve here. Immediately after Jesus' baptism comes the temptation by the devil and then his public ministry begins. The anointing with the Holy Spirit marks the start.

But there's even more to it than that. Whenever a human being serves in the ministry, he needs God's gifts to do God's work. The talents that I was born with are not enough. The skills that I can develop through study and practice won't get the job done. I need the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives because I am a human being. By definition I am a servant. That's what a human being is – a weak and lowly servant. Yet God calls me to be his representative to you. No human being is up to that. Not even Jesus. He was a real human being, so he was also a servant by nature. And God called him to serve all mankind. God called him to make the Father known to us. Even though he was perfect, his human nature still needed the gifts only God can give. So when his ministry began, God sent the Holy Spirit on him.

If Jesus needed those gifts because he was a real human being, what do we need? We aren't perfect, like he was. We were born sinners. More than just being weak and powerless, God's Word teaches that sin has touched every part of us. Every thought we think is contaminated by sin. Every feeling that passes through our hearts, every word we speak and action we do is touched by the poison of sin even when we are trying our hardest to serve God. St. Paul says that it's worse even than that. It's not just that every part of us is dirty and

covered with sin. Paul says that nothing good lives in us, that is in our sinful nature. All that we are by birth is totally ruined by sin.

So Jesus came to save us. He came to live that perfect life in our place, a life that we cannot live. In truth, a life that we cannot even imagine living. So many times, what Jesus says baffles us. I often wrestle with what he says and does and wonder how those can be the words and actions of a perfect man. The problem is not with what Jesus says and does. The problem is with my heart and my mind. It's with your heart and your mind. We are thoroughly corrupt and even after God gives us faith, sin still keeps us from fully grasping what a perfect man would do and say.

Since we can't be perfect, we can't make it to heaven. We have to die and we deserve hell. But Jesus was perfect for us. The ultimate act of his perfection was dying in our place. Jesus stretched his arms out on the cross and suffered hell and death there for us. And then he rose so that we could see that it worked. He rose to tell us that all our sin is paid for. That we are free. That God sees us as holy. God sees us as if Jesus himself were living our lives and facing our decisions and doing everything exactly the way God wants it done.

God sees Jesus when he looks at us because he washed our sins away in the waters of holy baptism. When the water is gone, the filth is gone. We step out of the bath holy and perfect in his sight. We step out of the bath with the promise of eternal life. Our baptism rests on Jesus' life and death and resurrection. That's what God is showing us today in Jesus' baptism. **Jesus was baptized because God made him the Christ.**

In the past, people didn't bath every day. When you had to heat the water with a wood fire and you had to draw it in buckets and carry it to the tub, bathing took a lot of work. It only happened once in a while. So, you got steadily dirtier and dirtier until you just had to have a bath. I think that led to a false understanding that arose in the ancient church. People got the idea that in baptism, you wash away all the sins that you've already committed along with all the sin you were born with. But the sin that comes later still has to be dealt with in another way. Has that thought ever occurred to you? It is not true. The bath that Jesus gives us is unique. Once you have been washed in baptism, you can't be dirty again, not in God's eyes. The baptism that you went through thirty or forty or even seventy or eighty years ago is a miracle: it still applies the life and death and resurrection of Christ to you. It still makes you clean, because Jesus gave you that bath. Trust his grace. Amen.