**Matthew 3:13-17** January 12, 2020

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Epiphnay 1–Our Lord’s Baptism

**When So Wrong Is So Right—Jesus Is Baptized**

*Matthew 3:13Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 15Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. 16As 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. 17And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

The full bird colonel bursts into the staff sergeant’s office. Before the sergeant can jump out of his chair and salute, the colonel salutes and says, “Reporting for duty, sir!” The sergeant is so completely gob-smacked by his commanding officer that he can’t even get out of his chair. He just sits there wondering what’s coming next. “Is this some kind of test? Was the colonel out too late last night? What’s going on?” He’s been in plenty of live-fire drills, but they never prepared him for this!

Ever been there? If not, let’s just imagine: The CEO comes down to the factory floor, not to see how things are going, but to pick up the tools, pack the boxes, and fill the orders. At first, you feel really, really uncomfortable. Then after you’ve gotten used to the idea you let him do some of the work, but when it comes to a really heavy box you’ll probably say, “Sir, let me get that. I’m used to it.”

I remember the time it happened to me, and I’m still not entirely ok with it. I was guest preaching at a congregation—just a guest preacher: here today, gone tomorrow. The church was the same church where my dad had just accepted a 2-year “retirement call”, a part-time pastor call. My dad’s first Sunday at that church, the Sunday he was to be installed as their pastor. It was the same Sunday I was there as a guest. Kind of weird. But it got weirder. Not much before the service my dad said to me, “No other pastor could get here today, so I need you to install me as the pastor of this congregation.” Install my own dad as pastor? Isn’t that sort of like “I am my own grandpa”? How can I get out of this? Who am I to install you, my dad? This is so wrong!” (BTW, Just so you’re not wondering for the rest of this sermon, I did end up installing my dad—which I’m still not entirely ok with.)

Which is just the beginning of where John the Baptist was in our reading. He had been preaching in that fire-and-brimstone way John the Baptist had. He kept on bringing up this “Someone Greater” who was coming after him. John said that if this “Someone Greater” ever stepped into his place, he John wouldn’t be worthy even to take the stinky, sweaty shoes off his feet.

And then the “Someone Greater” showed up, like a colonel—or make it a commander-in-chief—and tells John that he needs John to do the honor of baptizing him. It is so wrong! Today we learn why it was so right.

**When So Wrong Is So Right—Jesus Is Baptized**

All the people were coming to John to be baptized. John went right down the line. He baptized George and Edith and Tanya and Tim. All of them were sinners. All needed to repent. All needed the forgiveness God offered in baptism. But when Jesus stepped up, John’s mental machinery broke down. He couldn’t do it. ***“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”*** John clearly did not yet know everything about Jesus, but he knew enough to know that the real holy man standing in the Jordan River was not named John. So John protested. More than polite formalities—“You baptize me.” “No, you baptize me.” “No, you baptize me!” It was more than that. ***“John tried to deter him.”*** John actually had a humble disagreement with Jesus. “I can’t baptize you. This is so wrong!” [Note Greek imperfect and the word 

Jesus never contradicted John. He never said, “Hey, John. You undersell yourself. You’re ok by me.” Jesus basically admits, “You’re right! But you know what, John? I still want you to do it. ***Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.”*** Jesus pulls rank, “Do it!”

This is the mystery of our Savior. Lord of the universe, who made the seashore and the mountains you visit on your vacations; who brought into being the stars you look up in the night sky and marvel over – this Jesus says, “John,I need to be baptized by you. ***It is proper for us to do this.*”**

**I. This “So Wrong” Encourages Us**

What joy to see Jesus “need” John! God is pleased to use sinners in his plans. Like John we feel our limitations, our unworthiness for God’s great and glorious plans. Yet he is pleased to call us to duty. What an honor! When God calls you, even while you count your shortcomings, do not shirk his call.

Problem is, we live in an age when our shortcomings petrify us. We live in an age when honest mistakes get publicized for tens of thousands to view and ridicule. Make an honest error in judgment and expect John Q Public to demand your termination. This uncharitable 21st century way of dealing with human weakness has side effects. Teens and twenty-somethings have very little sense of the carefree lives that we over 40 felt in our youth. The culture of unloving criticism impacts even churches. In atmosphere of “You’d better do it right or else you’ll hear about it…” people are unwilling to take one or another volunteer or council position. Since they are not the perfect candidate for the job, why risk it? When people are quick to criticize rather than constructively assist, who would want to volunteer?

But still God calls us to serve his kingdom where and when we can. On the one hand, it is right to ask if we have the abilities for a given task. But on the other, we need to realize that God asks no more than he has given. John was *not* worthy to untie Jesus’ shoes. Truth! Yet Jesus told John to do something even greater, to baptize him. Is there a perfect chairman, secretary, treasurer, properties chairman, elder, or for that matter, pastor? No. But God is pleased to call people, with their individual gifts *and limitations*, to his service. And in Jesus this service is pleasing to God. Think about this when you see Jesus insist that John baptizes him.

**II. Baptized for our Righteousness**

But enough about John and us. John’s question, ***“And do you come to me?”*** sounds like a question we have: “Why *did* Jesus have to be baptized?”

If you have ever wondered why Jesus was baptized, know that you are in good company. John the Baptist asked it. And by you asking, you show that you understand who Jesus is. He is the only “unfallen, unsinning man” ever. (Eders.) There never has been and never will be another person to walk this earth who does not need God’s rich gift of baptism. But Jesus was the one who did not. So the question “Why was Jesus baptized?” is a very good one.

The answer is wrapped up in Jesus’ words, ***“It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.”***

Think of it this way: When we think about why we need Jesus, we usually think about Jesus taking away the guilt of our sins by his death on the cross. That is a marvelous truth. But here is the other side of it: God not only wants us cleaned up from our guilt, he also wants us full of goodness, full of righteousness. Jesus not only does the negative (removing our guilt), but he does the positive (supplying the goodness we don’t have.)

There’s a hymn we sing fairly often—we’ll be singing next week during the Communion distribution. It begins, “Jesus, your blood and righteousness my beauty are, my glorious dress.” Now that’s poetry language. Let me try again in everyday language: “Jesus, your blood and your righteousness make me beautiful to God. They are the glorious clothing I will wear when I stand before Him—Both your blood that cleanses me, and your righteousness that dresses me.” We need his righteousness!

I think of that when people talk about their relationship with God and say, “I’ve always tried to do my best.” How sad! Your hopes lie on you doing your best? Your and my best never has been all that good! Often, down-right pitiful. And what do you do about the shortfall in your best?

Jesus’ sacrifice for sin paid the guilt of all sin. In the same way, when Jesus fulfills all God’s commands, he does the good all people need to do. He hands out his righteousness to me and to you and to you, and because he is the Son of God, every little bit of his righteousness completely covers us. Jesus’ righteousness, not just his blood, but his doing the Law on behalf of sinful people will clothe us on the last day. That is Jesus’ explanation for being baptized: ***“It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.”*** As God’s Word says elsewhere, *“Through the obedience of the one man [Jesus] the many will be made righteous”* (Rom 5:19).

**III. Proof that It Is So Right**

Then, at Jesus’ insistence, ***“John consented”*** and baptized Jesus.

You ever have one of those days where nothing goes the way you expect? Not bad. In fact, it turns out better than you expected. But on point after point, it turns out very differently from what you expected. You are just left standing there saying, “Hmmm. I wasn’t expecting that!” This was John the Baptist. John hadn’t been expected to see Jesus, much less to baptize him. But what came next was more unexpected than anything.

***“Heaven was opened, and… the Spirit of God descended like a dove and lighted on [Jesus].”*** Jesus was “anointed” with the Holy Spirit. In ancient days—strange as it may sound to us—perfumed olive oil was gently poured over the head of a new leader or priest. This “anointing” let everyone know that this person was God’s chosen leader. But for Jesus it wasn’t just a perfumed olive oil anointing, it was a Holy Spirit anointing.

At the same moment, the voice of God the Father thundered, ***“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”***

Then John knew. And like John, we stand there, near, and yet feel a world away, while the Trinity, One God in Three Persons, confirm that Jesus is the Triune God’s designed and designated way to salvation. We are saved through this one who came to John and said, “Baptize me.”

It felt so wrong to John to baptize Jesus. This form of a dove, this thundering voice confirmed that this baptism was so right.

**IV. Righteousness Is What We Need**

In looking back at this amazing moment, it is worth noting one more thing. In all four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the first thing we hear of Jesus in his adult life is his baptism. It is easy to forget that in the jumble of our Sunday readings. We have all these events from Jesus life repeated week after week and we sometimes forget the order. All four times that the Son of God is introduced in God’s word, Jesus is not healing, he is not helping people, he is not even preaching or teaching. He is being God’s designated substitute for us, he is ***“fulfilling all righteousness.”*** That is how Jesus is introduced, and his sacrifice for sin is the closing act of Jesus’ life. All the healing and teaching are there in the middle. They are important. But they are of secondary importance. The reason Jesus came to earth is to be our Savior from our sin.

We must remember that in a world which finds all kinds of other reasons to pay attention to Jesus. Some think of Jesus as coach, cheerleader, Santa Claus or teddy bear. Wrong answers, all of them. He came to be our Savior.

He is just the right Savior. In my best moments I can only say to him like John, “I am unworthy.” In my worst moments I want to hide in shame. Yet always, he comes to me, assuring me that he has done all that needs to be done. He is my righteousness. He is the reason that I will be able to stand in confidence before God on Judgment Day.

Yes, it is so wrong that Jesus had to do all that for me. Yes, it is so right that he did! Thank you, Jesus! Amen.