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Mt. 3: 14-15

Baptism of our Lord

"But John tried to deter Him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.'"

There, in the Jordan River stood the two giants...though hardly equal giants: John the Baptizer... the greatest and last of the Old Testament Prophets... and our Lord Jesus... the Promised Messiah. John knew his place. He was not the greater ...but the lesser of the two. John also knew, in part, that Jesus did not belong in those waters... for John's baptism was a baptism of repentance... and Jesus had no sins of which He must repent.

John himself declared that Jesus is the Lamb of God... and He must be an unblemished Lamb if He is to take away the sins of the world. So, John asks, "I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" Our Lord's response is just as perplexing as His request to be baptized by John: "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."

The Lutheran question is "What does this mean?" Well, it certainly does NOT mean that Jesus is offering us a pious example of obedience which we also must do. Sadly, many churches today have come to understand Baptism in terms of obedience... a covenant of which they must fulfill their half of the obligation. In fulfilling this obligation commanded by God... they fulfill the Law's demand for righteousness. In other words...in most of Protestant Christianity...baptism is something we do for God...not something God does for us!

Likewise, many of these churches turn the Sacrament of the Altar into law, into something they must do out of obedience. On the other side of this altar is written: "Do this in remembrance of me." The words are scriptural... but the focus is on what "we do." The focus should be

on what God does for us in these Sacraments. It's all about who is in the verbs!

Both baptism and the Lord's Supper are God's Means to communicate His forgiveness and His palpable physical assurance that we are in fact saved in Christ! They are about His Presence among His people. This why His Means of Grace are joined with earthly elements. Water and the Word in baptism...bread & wine joined to Christ's Word and Promise in His Supper! Both of these are blessings and gifts that Christ gives to us... and does for us...not something we do for Him!

God is the one who draws us to the baptismal font. **God is the** one who put the gift of faith in our hearts that we may confess it with our mouths. **As for remembrance... the focus should NOT be "do this"... but what is remembered... namely, Christ's** mighty work of redemption on the Cross.

The biblical sense of remembrance, is primarily an act of faith... **which is** to say... **the work** of the Holy Spirit in us. **OUR flesh constantly** turns Gospel into Law. **It is natural** for us to think we have **to do** something to be worthy of salvation. **We want to** be in control...**we want to decide...we want** to dictate terms to God because of our sinful and rebellious nature. **For that reason** we too often focus on us and what we are doing in the Divine Service... **rather than** focusing on God, our Benefactor... **and on** what God is giving to us. **It is called Divine Service because it is God's Service to us...not what we do for Him!**

Our flesh constantly turns God's gracious act of salvation into law. **So, we find** ourselves asking, **"What is it about me that I'm saved and he is not?"** I wonder how often we are duped by certain Christian teachings that say to our flesh, **"Jesus did His part, now you must do your part for salvation."** They add, **"You must believe in Jesus"**...which suggests to the flesh that believing is **OUR** contribution to salvation. **A decision that** we make for God somehow.

The problem is that without the Holy Spirit...**we are** spiritually dead...**and folks...the dead** can do nothing for themselves. **It is always** God who comes to us...**it is** always God who delivers us...**it is** always God who transforms us from the walking dead into His beloved and Holy everliving people!

My friends... your faith is not yours... **it's entirely** the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit given to you. **That is what Grace means...a free gift!** Other errant teachings add that you must say a certain prayer for salvation...**the "believer's prayer"**. **Again, my friends,** consider this rubbish ... **for no** prayer or any other work you have done has contributed to your salvation.

Nor should such things be the assurance that you are really saved. **We cannot assure** ourselves of our salvation...**it is** God who comes to us in baptism and assures us. **How do you** know that you are saved?? **Because you are baptized!** **This why** we keep such meticulous records on baptism... **this is** why there are witnesses or sponsors for baptism...**so if** you doubt your place in the Kingdom...**we can** show you on the very day that God made you His own! **The very day,** God gave you eternal life!

Your only assurance is what Jesus did and continues to do. **But our flesh** would have us put Christ and the Cross behind us ...**as well** as any talk of faith and repentance... **and then** move onto the sanctified Christian life. **So, we push** Christ aside and clamor for **"relevant"** sermons and for rules and principles for a successful business, happy marriage, raising godly children, and the like. **Our flesh turns the** revelation of God's salvation in Christ into a Divine rule book dropped from Heaven. **Our flesh constantly** turns the Gospel into Law... **focusing on** our righteousness rather than Christ's righteousness.

Dear Friends, if you are looking for more relevance to apply in your Christ life...**understand that** you were dead in your sins and completely helpless... **in baptism...God comes to you...He pulls**

you out of the sewer called the world and He makes you His own. **There He gives you His Life...His Holiness...His forgiveness... and His Kingdom. Nothing...nothing is more relevant to the Christian walk than this!**

And that brings us back to our Gospel lesson. Our flesh and the devil would rob Baptism of the Gospel and make it into an ordinance to be obeyed or a covenant to be fulfilled. But notice that Christ is the One who submits Himself to Baptism "to fulfill all righteousness." He is the One who fulfilled the righteous demands of the God's covenant with Israel. He brought the Old Covenant to an end. Matthew begins his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus as "the son of David, the son of Abraham." In other words, Jesus is the sum & fulfillment of Israel's history. He is the perfect Israel reduced to one person. As Israel was called out of Egypt... so also Jesus as the true Son of God was called out of Egypt. Everything that God expected of Israel...all He Promised His people...is standing there in the flesh!

Paul speaks of Israel's crossing the Red Sea... calling it a baptism into Moses. By crossing these "baptismal" waters, Israel wandered in the wilderness, being tempted by the devil for 40 years. So, we find Christ undergoing a baptism of repentance on behalf of Israel's imperfect repentance... and immediately afterwards our Lord is led into the wilderness to be tempted for 40 days by the devil.

Most understand Israel's "baptism" into Moses to mean a "baptism" into the mosaic covenant. So, Christ submitted Himself to the baptism of the last prophetic voice of the old covenant... namely, John... precisely to fulfill the demands of the mosaic covenant...all of the Law! At the Jordan, Christ, fulfilled all righteousness... thereby turning the law of the Old Testament Church into Gospel for us in the New Testament Church.

If we were to turn our Baptism into a covenant of Law... we would, in effect, reject Christ who fulfilled all righteousness in His Baptism on our behalf. A fellow pastor once said, "Christ didn't need Baptism, but Baptism needed Christ." Water without Christ is mere water and no Baptism. But with Christ these waters are the very righteousness of God.

At the Jordan He joined Himself to the waters of our Baptism... this so that through our Baptism we may be joined to Him and His righteousness. Christ sanctified those baptismal waters at the Jordan... so that our baptismal waters may sanctify us. The entire Church needs Christ and His righteousness in those waters.

Israel, under the Old Covenant, was filled with shadowy images... including her baptism at the Red Sea... which came to perfection or fulfillment in Jesus Christ. By faith and faith alone ...that is her God given and God sustained faith... she perceived her baptism under the Old Covenant fulfilled in Christ.

Likewise, John's baptism of repentance bestowed forgiveness of sins because Christ was joined to the Jordan water in His baptism. By faith and faith alone, my friends... you have been joined to Christ's atoning death and His glorious resurrection in your Baptism.

Paul wrote, "[The Father] made [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor 5.21). That the language of His Exodus from Egypt... His Baptism... His victory over the devil in the wilderness... His long-suffering compassionate ministry... finally His innocent suffering and death on the Cross and His glorious resurrection... by which all righteousness comes fulfillment.

Dear baptized and Holy Ones of God...I earnestly implore you not to permit the devil or any well-meaning Christian to rob your children and you of Baptism and what our Lord gives you in that baptism!! For our Lord has joined Himself to the Jordan's waters that we by our Baptism may be joined to the very righteousness of Christ crucified, risen, and ascended to the right hand of God.

Do not ever let go of your Baptism, my friends... for therein is Christ Himself... His atonement for all sins... eternal life... an everlasting Kingdom... communion with the Father from ages onto ages...and it's all yours. Blessed be our Lord Jesus Christ, who has set aside the Jordan and all baptismal waters that we may appear before Him holy and blameless with all the saints in heaven. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...Amen.

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