

January 11, 2009
Baptism of Our Lord

"The Hand of God in Jesus' Baptism"

MARK 1:4-11

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." ⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

A few months ago when my brother had surgery after a heart attack it was a privilege to call him on the phone and remind him of his baptism with these words, "Charlie, you have been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." When my mother was in her last days it was a privilege to be there, hold her hand, and say, "Mom, you have been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and on the Holy Spirit."

If baptism is something we do for God to show our loyalty and commitment as some teach, then the worst thing a Christian son could do for his Christian mother in her last days is point her to a work she did in her baptism. However, if baptism is a miracle of God in our lives that brings us Christ and puts God's name on us, then it is a great privilege to point someone to that special blessing and gift that the hand of God gave to someone you love.

This morning we want to spend time looking at Jesus' baptism. We want to see the hand of God in Jesus' baptism, a miracle of God's love for us, part of God's plan to rescue us, planned from all eternity.

The hand of God in John's baptism

Note first the hand of God involved in the baptism of John that took place in the Jordan River. Our text says, "And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." In the original Greek the emphasis is on something important happening at a moment and time in history. God was breaking into our world by giving people this blessing of John's baptism in the waters of the Jordan River. This was not some man made ritual washing similar to what the Pharisees had offered people as a way to do good works to make people righteous. This was a blessing come down from heaven, from God. Later Jesus would ask the Pharisees if the baptism of John was from heaven or from men. They were afraid to answer because they knew people believed it was a blessing from God given to John, not some human ritual or ceremony.

John the Baptist's words and his baptism were a miracle from God because of the way the lives of people were changed. "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. Something similar happened when Peter preached a sermon at Pentecost. The hand of God performed a mighty miracle and 3000 people were brought to faith and they were baptized.

The hand of God was there in the life of John the Baptist. He was a voice crying out in the desert, a voice crying out for the Lord. John the Baptist talked to people about Jesus. He talked about Jesus as someone so great, that he was not worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals. He talked about Jesus as some who would come and baptize people with the Holy Spirit as John said, "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." It was John who joyfully told people, Look at Jesus, he is the Lamb of God "who takes away the sin of the world." This did not just happen by chance. It was a miracle of God reaching into the lives of people through the words of John the Baptist and the baptism he offered that pointed to Christ not our good works as the source of salvation.

When you talk about Jesus to your friends, and tell them how he is God from all eternity, and yet born as a child who lived on this earth as a human being, you are opening up the opportunity for God's hand to enter your words and create faith in the hearts of people. When you speak to people about their lost condition without Jesus, and tell them what Jesus has done to remove sin and protect them from the eternal fires of hell, you unleash the powerful hand of God in their lives. That is why Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes."

The hand of God in Jesus' baptism

We can also see the hand of the true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit present at Jesus' baptism. Our text says, "At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." The King James Version says, "And it came to pass." Things came to pass, came to happen, not by accident, but as part of God's plan. Jesus wanted to be baptized by John to fulfill the plan of his heavenly Father for his life on this earth. Jesus did not need this blessing of baptism, but he wanted it as an opportunity "to fulfill all righteousness." He wanted to do everything right to show us that he was stepping into our shoes, taking our sin upon himself, and ready to do the job of rescuing us.

Did you ever hire someone to do a job for you and then later you discovered it was not done right? The mechanic installed a new water pump in your car, but a year later it started leaking again. Another mechanic said it was not installed correctly because the person who did the job failed to put in a new seal, so it started leaking again and cost you another \$500.

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the one the Father has chosen to get the job done right. In our Old Testament lesson, Jesus the Messiah, said, "He made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver." His plan was to hit the bull's eye in the target again and again, always perfect in everything he did. That is why he wanted to be baptized to show us he was the one to do the job and get it done right. When it comes to trying to save myself, there is nothing I can do to get the job done right. I always sin, or fall short

of God's glory, even in my best efforts to do the right things.

Notice further the hand of God reaching down to us and confirming for us that we are putting our trust in the right place. "As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending in the form of a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased." The heavens were "torn open," the same word used for the veil of the temple being torn open when Jesus died. John the Baptist would later tell the world that he knew Jesus was the right one, the Messiah because of what he saw: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him."

The heavens were opened to reveal the Holy Spirit coming down on Jesus in the form of the Dove. Shortly after this Jesus would stand in front of the people in the synagogue in Nazareth and speak these words from Isaiah and apply them to himself, "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion-- to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

Then there was the voice of the heavenly Father also confirming that we are placing our trust in the right place when we put our trust in Jesus. The hand of the Father was certainly present there with Jesus as well. "You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased." Jesus needed to hear that voice of his Father. Being full human, he needed the words of the Father to strengthen him for the task ahead, and also assure him that everything was done perfectly up to this point. Well pleased. Later the Father would raise Jesus from the dead as further proof that he accepted the life of Jesus as the perfect payment for my sin and yours so we can someday be taken to the place Jesus has prepared for us. The book of Genesis tells us that God rested on the seventh day not because he was tired or weary, but because he wanted to cease from his work of creating and admire the creation he had made. At Jesus baptism the Father admired the life Jesus lived for us and said to his Son, "I am well pleased." My heavenly Father cannot say that about your life or mine. Think of the terrible thoughts that come into our hearts and minds as we think bad things of other people, or even fail to trust in the Lord as much as we should. There is no righteousness that we can muster in ourselves as we listen to the words of the prophet Jeremiah: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Jesus' life was pure. In that pure life that was pleasing to the Father, we have our source of pardon, cleansing, and removal of all sin, and a clean robe of righteousness to wear at all times before our God.

I was privileged to be there with my mother in her last days. I heard my father sing to my mother with a feeble and faltering voice a hymn that he had learned in German "Jesus, your blood and righteousness My beauty are, my glorious dress; Mid flaming worlds, in these arrayed, With joy shall I lift up my head." Our hope of being accepted by God when we die, and our hope of being loved by our Father in this life, does not depend in any way, shape or form on our righteousness. It is all about God the Father being pleased with the life that Jesus lived for us.

3) The hand of God in your baptism

We want to conclude this sermon today on the hand of God in Jesus' baptism by thinking once again of the hand of God in our baptism. You were baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our second lesson says that the jailor and his family were baptized and they were filled with joy because he had come to believe in God. Galatians tells us "As many of you has have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Our baptism miraculously connects us to Jesus suffering, death and resurrection.

Martin Luther always reminded himself of his baptism with the Latin words, "Baptismus sum" I have been baptized. He was not rejoicing in something he had done for God, but rejoiced in the blessings God had given to him. The same hand of God that blessed you in your baptism will work out everything for your good and his glory in this life, and the hand of God in Jesus' baptism will take you to the place Jesus has prepared for us. Amen.