

Year C Baptism of the Lord Luke 3 15 to 17 and 21 to 22

Today we see the difference between the baptism that John offers and that of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. This difference is crucial to our salvation.

John calls his baptism a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What does that mean? First, we must remember that “repentance” does not simply mean being sorry for any wrongdoing we have done. Repentance in Greek, literally means a turning around of mind – it means changing the way we look at the world, turning to God, only to God, as the measuring stick for right behaviour and right thinking. John’s baptism of repentance is the contract between the baptizer and the one being baptized that says, “I hereby agree to turn my life – body, mind, and spirit – to God and only to God.” The baptizer then ritually washes away the person’s sins by immersing the person in water.

There is a problem with this type of baptism. Within days, or hours, or maybe even minutes, the baptized person can turn again to the ways of the world and be thought of as, once again, unclean with sin. This is why the Jewish people repeatedly underwent ritual cleansing in water for the forgiveness of their sins. Baptism literally means “ceremonial dipping” and the people therefore regularly underwent a “ceremonial dipping.”

John explains to the crowd before him that the Messiah, whom they are expecting, will have a very different type of “ceremonial dipping” for them. While John baptizes only with water, the Messiah baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire. It is a fire, John says, that will burn away our chaff, our broken sinfulness.

Luke then describes for us this type of baptism by showing to us the baptism of Jesus. Jesus is the first person to undergo this new type of baptism. Perhaps you

wonder why Jesus is baptized when he is the Messiah. Jesus is a human – without sin, but human nonetheless. And Jesus does not undergo John’s baptism “for the forgiveness of sins.” In fact, Luke does something pretty nifty here. He removes John from the story before Jesus is baptized. John is thrown into prison by King Herod and Luke then simply says Jesus was baptized. So, who baptized Jesus? Maybe it was one of John’s followers, maybe Jesus walked into the Jordan and dunked himself...we don’t know. Luke is making an important point here. He doesn’t tell us who baptizes Jesus because it doesn’t matter who baptizes Jesus. What matters is that Jesus is baptized – showing solidarity with the rest of Israel. And the baptism Jesus undergoes is the baptism with the Holy Spirit that John has told us about. Jesus is the first to undergo this baptism with the Holy Spirit and, in doing so, Jesus forever changes baptism.

When Jesus came to be baptized, he came to be identified as the pivotal figure the people were expecting – the one who would bring the new age of the fullness of God’s kingdom. Israel was meant to be the light to the nations, God’s people who would show the world how to live the ways of God’s kingdom and draw others into that life. On the whole, the Jewish people were unable to do this. Being imperfect humans, they fell back into old habits and lived according to the broken ways of the world. Jesus is for them, and for us, the one completely perfect human, the one human in perfect relationship with God, who can be for all of us the light to all nations, the one able to lead all of us into living God’s purpose – the perfect 3-way relationship between God, people, and planet.

His baptism is the signal to the crowd of onlookers that God is taking steps, through the life and ministry of this person before them...Jesus of Nazareth...God

is taking steps toward the fulfillment of his purpose. God's voice from heaven identifies Jesus as God's Son, in whom God is well pleased. This would have recalled for the people the words of Psalm 2, used at the crowning of a new king: "You are my son," Psalm 2 says, "I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession." And, whereas an earthly monarch would be anointed with oil, Jesus is anointed with the Holy Spirit. Jesus is now more than just Jesus of Nazareth. He is Jesus the Christ – the anointed...the anointed one of God.

Baptism is now no longer a ceremonial dipping that signifies simply the cleansing of sin. In baptism, the heavens are opened – there is no barrier between earth and God – the Holy Spirit descends to anoint the one being baptized, and God claims this person as his child. Jesus has opened the door to heaven – to the presence of God – he has opened the door for us and, through baptism, we walk through the door.

You will notice that I jumped from talking about Jesus being baptized to talk about people in general who are baptized. We may not see the heavens open. We may not see a dove descending. The onlookers may not hear the voice of God claiming us as his child but, make no mistake, this is precisely what happens. And it happens to us because it first happened to Jesus.

How is this possible? How is it that, because this happened to Jesus, this is now what happens to us? There is another Scripture passage called to mind by the words, "This is my son, in whom I am well pleased." Isaiah wrote, hundreds of years before, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him" (Is.42:1). The passage goes on to tell us

what this servant will do...He will bring justice to the whole earth, he will be “a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Is.42:6-7). It is no coincidence that Luke later tells us that these are the words that Jesus applies to himself when he first teaches in his hometown synagogue. This servant, with whom Jesus identifies himself, is the servant Isaiah later tells us will be wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities...and by his bruises we are healed (Is.53 see v.5)...words pointing to Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus calls his death and resurrection his “baptism.” “Can you handle the baptism I am about to be baptized with?” he asks his disciples when John and James tell him they want to share in his glory (Luke 12:50, Mark 10:38). For Jesus, the baptism that began in the Jordan River was completed on the cross when he died and then rose again because the baptism of the Messiah is not just a ceremonial dipping into water for the forgiveness of sins. The baptism of the Messiah is the full and complete entrance into God’s kingdom as a child of God. For Jesus, the man from Nazareth, this full and complete entrance into God’s kingdom happened when he was resurrected in glory, with his resurrection body, never to die again.

But this man from Nazareth was also God. So, what God had done for Jesus of Nazareth, God could also do for us. John’s baptism of water was a sign pointing the people to God’s kingdom – “Be ready,” he was telling them, “God’s kingdom is coming, it’s time to come clean.” In Jesus’ baptism the sign of water and the reality of God’s kingdom met. The heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended, God spoke. God’s kingdom had arrived in bodily form – God dwelling on earth, Jesus of Nazareth. His baptism was sign of water and God’s kingdom united together, opening the door for us into God’s kingdom. How do we enter this

door? Paul explains in his letter to the Romans: “Do you not know,” he writes, “that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore,” he continues, “we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom.6:1-5).

Baptism is not merely a welcoming ceremony – our baptismal certificate is not a membership card. Baptism is our intense, personal encounter with the Almighty God who created us and all things – God anoints us. God claims us. We enter the door into God’s kingdom, a new creation clothed in the righteousness of Christ. This only needs to happen once.

The grace-filled, restorative Christian sacrament of baptism began with Jesus in the Jordan and was consummated on the cross. But there wasn’t a vacuum of nothingness in between. The Holy Spirit anointed Jesus to begin his ministry – to guide, to direct, to enable Jesus to do all that he was able to do, to accomplish God’s purpose. Jesus’ life, all that he said and did, was an ongoing fulfillment of his baptism. Baptism is a process, from the moment we are immersed in the Jordan River – otherwise known as a baptismal font – to the moment we are resurrected in glory, our chaff burnt away by his purifying fire...and there is not meant to be a vacuum of nothingness in our lives in between. The Holy Spirit anoints us to accomplish God’s purpose. Our whole lives – all that we say and do – are the ongoing fulfillment of our baptism.

As Christ bore the kingdom so now do we. Being immersed in our baptism is being immersed into the life of Christ – and we are in it with every other person who has joined Christ’s life in baptism. Life in Christ is life in God’s kingdom. We are empowered by the Spirit not only to join the movement towards the perfection that is the fulfillment of God’s purpose, but to invite others to join this movement and to live the qualities of the kingdom life – not only helping the vulnerable and fighting for equality but also helping ourselves through worship, prayer, and scripture study. Changing the world goes hand in hand with changing ourselves. It is a tall order but we pledged our lives to it. We will renew this pledge when we renew our baptismal vows and we will be sent into the world by the Spirit just as Jesus was, striving to accomplish God’s purpose as Jesus did, and we too will hear, “You are my child with whom I am well pleased.”