

Baptism of our Lord
January 8/9, 2022

And they saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove upon Jesus. Do not suppose for one moment that in this moment Jesus became the Christ. Some think in these terms. Jesus, who's name means "God's salvation," the one who existed before all time, has come to reveal the path of salvation to all who believe. Although many live as though life is okay, with just a few things to be cleaned up in order to make it perfect, this life has one significant fatal flaw: that is, that it is fatal.

You see, there is a real problem. We were born separated from the One who created us to be united with Him in a living and loving relationship. The desire for love in our age is a desire God has put into our hearts. But as we all know, things have gone quite wrong. The world chases after the feeling, but true love is the willing submission of one to the other. It takes both. In Ephesians, wives are told to submit to their husbands. Husbands are directed to lay down their lives for their wives. The word picture is very simple to understand. Both lay down their lives for the other. This is the foundation of love. Jesus laid down His life for us and we are called to lay down our lives for Him.

This is not some kind of crazy death wish, but the reality of how a relationship of love works. When a loving relationship is born, it takes on a new life, a life that either one alone could never have imagined. Yes, the individuals are who they are, but there is this new personality which is the personality of the two as one. Fully themselves and yet new. In a small way, this is the reality of what we are invited into when we are united with Christ. We embark on a grand adventure to become more than we could ever be if we were to stay on our own. It is not losing our identity to become like Christ, it is the very thing for which we were created and the thing that makes us more of ourselves than we ever could be on our own. This is the heart of the journey of faith. It is called a journey because it is the path upon which we discover who, or should I say whose we are.

When we were baptized – the word literally means to be immersed – we were baptized into the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We have been given the invitation to be immersed in Holy Trinity. The life of faith is found in immersing ourselves into the One in whom we have been invited to be in a living, loving relationship. When you listen to Jesus' words about abiding in Him as He abides in you, one begins to see how this all works in relationship. It is this relationship which is the foundation of our faith. Baptism is no mere ritual that splashes (or for some submerses) us in water. What is water? It is something without which our physical bodies could not live. But water and the Word? The Word is with God and the Word is God. The Word made flesh is Christ our Savior. The very name – God's salvation – begins its work through the promise of our salvation.

I will grant you that I have done a few baptisms where, labeling them splash and dash, the baptism happens and then I never see the baptized again. But who am I to judge these things? God is doing what God does. His word will never come back void. This reminds me of one, now 96, who was baptized in a Lutheran church close to where I grew up. After confirmation, he really had nothing to do with the organized church, but by all appearances I now can see, the Holy Spirit was at work in his life. After 75 years of staying away from the church (and a life of outward allegiance), I was privileged to pronounce absolution and provide communion. What has happened since is nothing less than the miracle of faith, putting the pieces of true life together and bringing him to the place of an active, living relationship with the living Lord.

People along the way may have judged him lost, but the Lord knows those who are His. The word of the Lord never comes back void. This is not to say that every baptism is effective. I do not know. Our Lord forbids us to go there. What He does command is that we go to all the world, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We understand that only two things are necessary for baptism: water and the Triune name of our God. Everything else belongs to our Lord who does what He does.

When someone says, “You Lutherans believe,” it often is a pronouncement of condemnation over the practice the Lord has given us. We can dunk fully in water. This time of year, who would want to. We can use water from a puddle – as was done for the Ethiopian Eunuch – but the amount of water is not what is important. What is important is into what, or should I say, “Whom” we are being immersed that matters. More important than this is not what we do, but what He is doing. God’s word is ever-active, a two-edged sword which accomplishes what it sets out to accomplish.

There is the reality of the cleansing of water. If you will, there is a metaphor here which speaks of the cleansing God will do when we submit to our baptism, only this is not an outward cleansing, but an inside-out cleansing which prepares us to be able to stand in the presence of a holy and just God. Never think of these things as acts of your own doing, for it is the very power of the Holy Spirit which is at work in all of us. God is at work in all of our lives. He who came as the model of the Godly life has, quite literally, accomplished salvation for us.

The baptism of Jesus was a baptism for repentance. Jesus was immersed in repentance. A bad man does not know he needs to repent. A better man know he needs to repent, but is unaware of all that needs to be repented. Only a perfect man would be able to perfectly repent, but then, a perfect man would have no need for repentance. But, Jesus underwent this baptism. Why? Can you not see that our Savior became one of us, lived a human life, and did all that is needed for our sake. He who knew no sin became our sin so that we who do not know righteousness could become His righteousness. He repented for each one of us. He, quite literally, took our sins upon Himself so that we, who deserve the recompense of sin, might become like Him. This is the offering our Savior has given us. But do not make less of this than it is.

Being submerge with Christ in repentance, He goes to work to the very center of our being. He will root out all of the things that get in the way of being holy, righteous, even as He is, of His own nature, holy and righteous. The joy we have is in the simple and humble knowledge that we have the forgiveness of everything that gets in the way of our living in the loving relationship which is established in and through Him. Yes, work at it as if everything depended upon you, but know with each act that it is God who is at work in you. The power of the Word made flesh is active in all who believe. Christ has saved us, we are being saved, and the faithful will stand before the Lord and hear, “Well done good and faithful servant.” We do not hope as those who have no hope, wishfully seeking what can never be. We have hope that because He has done all that was needed, including going to the cross in our stead, we have the promise of life and life everlasting before us.

Yes, the witnesses saw the Holy Spirit descend. The One who is greatest of all was revealing His Triune nature. We too have the Holy Spirit upon us. We are encouraged each day to walk in the newness of life which comes through the fulfilled promise of Jesus. Do not be unbelieving, but believe that God has accomplished your salvation through Christ. Now comes our part: to walk humbly with Him now and forever. Amen.