

Service Date—January 10, 2021
Sermon Text--Matthew 3:13-17

Seeing it in the box and even out of the box it looked like an ordinary watch. A band and a face and a couple of buttons on the side. Ho hum, just a watch. But whoa! Put it on the charger and fire it up, start pushing those buttons and poking at the screen, and you see it is no ordinary watch. It's a smart watch. You can check your heart rate with it, text with it, talk into it, it even tells time. Our Savior is sort of like that. When we see him at his birth, he looks like any other baby, nothing real special. Sure, we are told that he is Christ the Lord and the Wonderful Counselor and all those other things. But at Christmas time Jesus looks pretty ordinary. But then comes Epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas, January 6th, and we enter into this Epiphany season and we get to see Jesus as he really is. It's sort of like charging up that watch and pushing some buttons and touching a few icons on the screen and Whoa! Here we have the Son of God and the Savior of the world—we hear him preach with power and see him heal the sick, still storms, and drive out demons. That is what this Epiphany season is about—it's a time to see just how awesome the gift God gave us at Christmas time really is. And this year we start to discover the glory of God's gift to us at one of the truly great epiphanies of our Savior—his baptism in the Jordan River by John. And as we look at this epiphany we will see the glory of our Savior and not only that but in a two for one deal we will get a look at the glory of baptism as well. So, let's go to the Jordan River today and Behold the Blessings of Baptism—first the blessings of baptism for Jesus, and then the blessings of baptism for us.

I. Behold the Blessings of Baptism for Jesus

If this account of Jesus' baptism sounds a bit different from what you are used to hearing that's because it's St. Mark's account. In his usual concise way of writing he leaves out the conversation between Jesus and the Baptizer who is reluctant to baptize Jesus, rushes right in to tell about Jesus baptism. That conversation always provoked a question: "Why was Jesus baptized?" No, Mark doesn't record that brief exchange, but in his own way he invites us to ask that question anyway. Notice that our reading begins with a reminder of the ministry of John; how he preached and baptized to prepare God's people to welcome their Savior. I think those verses are included again in Epiphany to set the baptism of Jesus in the starkest contrast with the crowds who came to John from Judea and Jerusalem. St. Mark tells us that people swarmed to see and hear this fiery preacher of repentance and faith in Jesus. As they came they confessed their sins and were baptized by John with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That means that John's baptism was connected with the confession of sins and contrition—sorrow over sin—and resulted in the forgiveness of sins. And then he writes: "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." So, on the one hand, you have the crowds of people who by the preaching of John have come to see themselves as sinners, they are assured of forgiveness through the coming Savior, and are baptized as a seal and confirmation of that forgiveness. It's like one of those movies where everyone except the star is dressed in drab colors, maybe black and white, while the star wears a bright red coat. Jesus; we know about him. John proclaims his greatness in our reading: "One more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals!" When know about Jesus: He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary who was told by the angel of God who announced the coming birth that "the Holy One to be born of you will be called the Son of God." And so, the question is: why was Jesus baptized? Why was this one dressed in snowy white righteousness standing in line with sinners to be baptized?

Here, at the very outset of his public ministry—in our reading from Acts 10, Simon Peter called Jesus' baptism his anointing. With this anointing Jesus entered into his public ministry and is proclaimed to be the great and supreme Prophet, Priest and King promised in the Old Testament. As Luther says: "Here (at his baptism) Christ truly becomes the Christ." Was Jesus simply setting us an example? Was this an act of obedience? Was his baptism just an empty shell that he really didn't need and wouldn't do him any good? I doubt if his cousin John would have gone along with such a charade. When the self-righteous religious leaders came to him thinking they had no sins that needed forgiveness he rebuked them severely as a brood of vipers and the off-spring of the serpent, Satan. No, Jesus took his place with sinners because he had come to save sinners. And the way he would do that in God's wondrous plan of salvation was by taking the sins of the world on himself in order to take them to the cross and pay for them with his blood. He would become, by way of imputation, as Luther says: "the biggest of sinners, having and bearing all the world's sin."

It is as part of his work as Savior that Jesus stands in line with sinners, because as the prophet Isaiah said of the coming Savior: "He was numbered with the transgressors." It is true that Jesus had no sins of his own to confess, but as St. Paul writes: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus did not need this baptism for sins of his own, but as God's scape goat, the innocent Son who took upon himself the guilt of the world it was utterly proper for Jesus to be baptized with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus' baptism was then a confession of sins; in which he proclaims himself as the Lamb of God sent to take away the sins of the world. A most important truth for as Luther says, "There are only two places where your sins can be either you bear them and their guilt and you are doomed to die under them, or they are on Jesus and you are free." The prophet Isaiah said of the coming Savior: "We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Think of what the Bible says about sin. "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him." Where are the sins of your heart, your hatred, lust and greed? Are you carrying them or is Christ? Think of Jesus' warning in Matthew 12: "Men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken." Where are the little lies you've told, the gossip you've passed, the dirty jokes you've told, the profanity you've used?" See Jesus standing in line with sinners and you know where your sins are.

And then see him baptized with a baptism connected with repentance and resulting in forgiveness. The burden of sin Jesus took up—yours and mine—was a burden that brought him deep distress—just listen later in his ministry as the cross looms and he says: "Now is my soul troubled," or look ahead to the Garden of Gethsemane. And that forgiveness would have brought him the same blessing it brought to King David when he was assured of forgiveness after confessing his sins. He said: "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sins the Lord does not count against him." Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism is followed by the temptation of Jesus by the devil. He begins by telling us that after Jesus had fasted 40 days and 40 nights, he was hungry. Would it be so strange for the Lamb of God to be troubled by a burden of sin? Would it be so strange for the one who said, "Come to me, and I will give you rest," to find rest in the forgiveness of sins. But Jesus knew something else about the forgiveness that was bestowed in baptism—he would have to earn it by his innocent life under God's law and by his horrible death under God's wrath.

It is interesting that St. Luke tells us that after Jesus was baptized and as he stepped out of the water onto the river bank "he prayed." What do you think he prayed? He's entering into his public ministry which will include facing temptation to sin and ultimately the wrath of God against sin. Jesus understood the awesome mission that lay ahead and no doubt he gave thanks to his heavenly Father for the peace of forgiveness, but surely he also asked his heavenly Father for the power he needed to carry that awesome mission to completion. See the forgiveness Jesus received and was assured of in his baptism is a forgiveness for which he would have to pay with his life on the cross. He prayed to his Father in heaven for strength and help to carry out his saving work and his prayer was heard. We read in Mark's gospel that Jesus saw "the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove." This had been foretold by the prophet Isaiah through whom the Lord God spoke of Jesus and said: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my Spirit on him... in faithfulness he will bring forth justice, he will not falter or be discouraged." It is as Simon Peter preached in the house of Cornelius: "Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit and power." It was in the power of the Spirit that Jesus "went about doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him."

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with you." Think of the comfort this day would bring Jesus in coming days and years when Satan would begin his temptation with the words: "If you are the Son of God," or when he heard enemies cry out: "If you are the Son of God save yourself." He could look back and say: "I am the Son of God, my heavenly Father loves me, he told me so." When the toil and troubles of the ministry made him weary, he had the strength of the Holy Spirit to draw on and to revive him. Do you see the blessing baptism brought to Jesus: the assurance of forgiveness of the sins he bore, the Spirit to strengthen him in his state of humiliation and the promise of his Father: "You are my Son, whom I love, I am well pleased with you"? Now let us see the same blessings in our baptisms.

II. Behold the Blessings of Baptism for us

As we have seen Jesus stands before us as the One who had come to purchase with his blood the forgiveness that comforted him at his baptism and he receives the Spirit of God and hears the promise of his Father to sustain and strengthen him in his mission. And he accomplished his mission by living among us and by being tempted in every way just as we are, yet was without sin, and by dying under God's curse, so that John can proclaim him to be the atoning sacrifice not only for our sins, but also for the sins of the whole world. The empty grave on Easter Sunday is God's assurance that Christ completed his saving work successfully. But now the question is how do the merits of Christ come to us? How do the benefits of Jesus sinless life and his innocent death become ours? We need them. The Bible says, "Without holiness no one will see God." Are the blessings Christ won for sinners something we must earn? Must we somehow come to them and lay hold on them ourselves? Or does God give them to us? And if he does then how does he do that? Our reading reminds us that one way this great exchange is made is through baptism. Listen to the testimony of the Peter as he addresses the conscience-stricken crowd that had crucified Jesus seven weeks before. In answer to their terrified question: "What shall we do?" Simon Peter said: "Repent and be baptized every one of you for the forgiveness of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Luther is right when he says in the Small Catechism in answer to the question: "What does baptism do for us?" He says, "Baptism works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe as the words and promises of God declare."

But there are still more gifts bestowed on us in baptism. As the Christ, the anointed one stepped out of the Jordan River the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove to strengthen the Savior for the awesome work of redemption that lay ahead of him. Jesus would face temptation to sin and abandon his saving work. He would face ridicule, arrest, a Roman scourge, a crown of thorns, contempt and a cross, and through it all—until that horrible cry: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” the Spirit of God would sustain him. In the same way, as baptized children of God we have received the Spirit of God. St. Paul writes in Titus 3, “God saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.” As Christians we walk a road heavenward that is lined with temptations and with suffering. But we are left alone. We are led by the Spirit of God. And strengthened by the Spirit we put to death the misdeeds of the body, and in our suffering, we have the Spirit of God as the first-fruits of God, his down-payment guaranteeing our redemption from the world of sin to the glory of heaven.

And one more blessing we receive in our baptism. Listen to what St. Paul says in Galatians 3:27: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.” And there we have certainly one of the greatest blessings of baptism. As the Father said, “You are my Son, whom I love. I am well-pleased with you,” at his Baptism, so God says to all who are baptized in the name of the triune God, you are my Son, you are my daughter. As that word sustained Jesus when the devil hissed his: “If you are the Son of God,” so when our sins rise up to trouble us and life’s burdens make us wonder: “Can I possibly be a child of God?” Go back to your baptism and hear the Father speak from an open heaven: “Now you are my child, my son, my daughter.” “My children,” God says. You are mine; you belong to me, so “Fear not I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name and put my name on you, you are mine.” Children of God and if we are children then we are heirs. Heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. When the trials of life and its troubles make us question our status as God’s children we have our baptism and its promise: “This is my son, this is my daughter,” to comfort and sustain us.

What amazing blessings we behold in baptism! Like that smart watch in the package and the baby Jesus in the manger, the water of baptism doesn’t look like much, but behold the blessings of baptism for Jesus and behold the blessings of baptism for us. Amen.

