

First Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 3:13-17



“¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

The man wearing camel hair named John had already spent time at the Jordan, and therefore more people were always going to him. John had a deep understanding of the God's righteousness. He knew that because of the rampant unrighteousness in the world, God's judgement must be given. Otherwise, one would not be able to differentiate between right and wrong. However, such righteousness is not brought without pain. There are people who are either on the side of right or on the side of wrong, and the one who stands on the side of wrong carries the fullness of unrighteousness upon his shoulders. This is why John is such an uncomfortable preacher. He has denounced the faults and unrighteousness of the people and brought in the light. He wanted the people to change from the side of unrighteousness to the side of righteousness, even if this was uncomfortable for them. Those who thought they were exceptions to this or who thought they were less of a sinner than others were the ones whom John denounced and exposed the most mercilessly. John understood that the heart was sinful and knew that there were no exceptions. Certainly, this is why John was initially upset when Jesus wanted to baptize him. John already knew who Jesus was and he knew with certainty that Jesus was different from the others. John could not denounce sin and unrighteousness with only his piercing gaze. That's why it made no sense to John that Jesus should be baptized by him. That would be a total reversal of God's righteousness. The just would be made unjust, and the unjust would be made just. Therefore, John said “Not like that!”

Jesus answered him with these strange words: “This must be done in order to fulfill all righteousness.” John was confused, yet he understood one thing with certainty. Here, the righteous replaces sinners, and here even the righteous becomes sin. Here, the righteous person feels the full weight of God's judgement. John had a hunch about what all this might mean, because he himself had proclaimed these words: “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Is this the revelation of God's new righteousness?

John knew much about sin. After all, his main task was to hear the confessions of sinners and baptize. He therefore knew exactly what the human heart was like. He must have thought with concern about the people's lives when they stepped out of the water. John knew even the best sermons in the world couldn't get him anywhere. The people were leaving the waters of baptism but carrying their sins with them just as before. That's why John once delivered a sermon as terrible as thunder. But, had anything changed? John had to admit that himself and the people were very far from the meaning of God's justice. Then, Jesus came and placed Himself under the baptismal waters; A baptism performed by a sinner. What a trade!

As John stood stunned before this miracle, a wonderful sight was beheld. God spoke from heaven and the Holy Spirit appeared in the form of a dove. God said, “This is my beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased.” Since that word, we haven't heard a single thing from John. The scene where God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit appear together in complete harmony and love must have

completely blown him away. All he had seen of the terrible injustice and cruelty in the world was now overcome by the words “This is my beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased.” Yes, that is how it should be! The righteousness of God is fulfilled, and that is now how God speaks to each of us: “You are my beloved. I love you.”

Now let’s shift our focus from the Jordan Valley to Leipzig and shift our focus from the heart of John to our own hearts. Surely, we do not have as deep an understanding of God’s righteousness as John did. Yet each of us knows when something is wrong and when there is something wrong in our own hearts. Surely, there are dark places in your heart that you have sealed with ten locks so that no one will find out about them. Maybe you are overwhelmed by exhaustion because of how powerless you are in the face of so many terrible things in our world. All these thoughts do not go without injury. Sin and unrighteousness are like a poison that destroys everything. They make us tired, exhausted, and even depressed. Like John in his Jordan Valley, we follow his example, gazing away from our hopelessness and towards Jesus. Like John, we must allow Jesus to convince us that His path is the right one, even when it is difficult to understand.

Jesus said to John, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for all righteousness to be fulfilled” (Matt. 3:15). It is as though Jesus is telling us today, “I know your hopes and dreams. You hope that things will get better, and that is exactly why I came. I have come to fulfill all righteousness. You people have the desire to do good but lack understanding for what that means. That is why you so desperately look for things or people who can give you comfort, yet you find none. I am not trying to brush off your hopeless attempts to please God, nor am I concerned with hurting you with my righteousness. All I care about is being with you through all circumstances and that is why I am giving my righteousness to you. I am giving it away and standing by your side. It is not because I see my righteousness as something to throw away. Rather, it is expensive, valuable, and has cost me much pain and even my life. That is why I want it to go exactly where I will: To you!”

For us, Epiphany means marveling at Jesus, Who has come to be so close to us. Not only does He come so close, but He even goes to our deepest thoughts and does not shy away. He goes to our personal pains and places Himself under the full weight of our unrighteousness. All of this comes to a climax when Jesus dies on the cross for our sins. His baptism in the Jordan Valley was only a prelude to Golgotha. It is here on Golgotha where Jesus, the Righteous One, takes our sin upon Himself and the voice of God is heard from heaven: “This is my beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased.” If John was allowed to experience the voice of God with his own ears at the baptism of Jesus, it means that God wanted him to hear these words. God wants us to know that all righteousness is fulfilled in Jesus. Our deepest thoughts are also uncovered and forgiven by Jesus. Ultimately, God speaks these words about us as well: “You are my beloved. I love you!”

When Jesus was baptized by John, He put Himself in the same water as us. It is the water of unrighteousness and is the place where sin has settled. Now we are with Jesus in baptism. We share this water with Him, but because He is righteous and without sin our baptism is no longer a reckoning, but imputation and gift. The righteous becomes sinner and the sinner becomes righteous. That is precisely why, before His ascension, Jesus commanded His disciples to go into all the world and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we are baptized, heaven will be opened to us again. This time, in baptism, God speaks to us the words He proclaimed at Jesus’ baptism. God’s pleasure is now upon us, and we can experience it repeatedly when we draw the cross of Jesus on our foreheads and chests and pray the Lord’s Prayer or confess our sin. Each time, we again go to the place where God has proclaimed His pleasure over our lives in Christ. Not only that, but we also go to the cross of Jesus. On that cross, we die with Jesus and rise with Him in new life. Amen.