

The Baptism of Our Lord  
St. Matthew 3:13-17

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The people flocked out to see him. He preached repentance to them. They met him in the river. There they were baptized by him, a baptism of repentance. Sinners flocked to John the Baptizer and heard the Law of God:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father," for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 3:7b-10)

Many did bear fruit in keeping with repentance as they were baptized by John. Down into the Jordan they went, one after another, to be washed by him, crucified, as it were, by his preaching of repentance. From John, the greatest of the prophets and that preacher sent by God, they received the forgiveness of their sins. But then he said it:

I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:11-12)

They all looked up, and that's when they saw it. "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him."

Now, John, recognizing that Jesus didn't need the baptism he was performing at the Jordan, tried to prevent Him. After all, this is the same Jesus to whom John pointed and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29) Such a lamb appointed to be a sin offering would be without spot or blemish. Jesus, being the fulfillment of the sacrificial lambs, would be perfect and blameless; He would be without sin, as would be fitting of a sacrificial Lamb appointed to take away the sin of the world. The weight of the world's sin would be taken upon this Lamb, and for it He would die. What need did Jesus have with a baptism of repentance? What need did Jesus have for forgiveness? "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

"Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." The voice and the One about which he cried had to do this to fulfill all righteousness. What does this mean?

Well, think of righteousness in terms of the saving deeds that YHWH performs on behalf of His people; Matthew borrowed this kind of terminology from the Old Testament—he was, after all, writing to Jewish readers, you might recall hearing before. All righteousness—the saving deeds of YHWH—was to be fulfilled in the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan. A point made throughout St. Matthew's Gospel is that Jesus is the fulfillment of all prophecy; therefore, being the fulfillment of all prophecy, Jesus is the fulfillment of all righteousness. The prophet Isaiah wrote,

My righteousness is near,  
My salvation has gone forth,  
And My arms will judge the peoples;  
The coastlands will wait upon Me,  
And on My arm they will trust.  
Lift up your eyes to the heavens,  
And look on the earth beneath.  
For the heavens will vanish away like smoke,

The earth will grow old like a garment,  
And those who dwell in it will die in like manner;  
But My salvation will be forever,  
And My righteousness will not be abolished.  
Listen to Me, you who know righteousness,  
You people in whose heart is My law:  
Do not fear the reproach of men,  
Nor be afraid of their insults. (Isaiah 51:5-8)

So, when Jesus was baptized to fulfill all righteousness, John, in that act, continued to preach of Jesus that He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. When Jesus was baptized to fulfill all righteousness, Jesus declared that He is the righteousness of YHWH in whom **all** the saving deeds of God are to be found.

And, dear hearers, if **all** of the saving deeds of God are located in Jesus, the Lamb of God, then there are no saving deeds located anywhere else. There is no salvation in the temple sacrifices of the countless lambs. There is no salvation in the works of your hands. Jesus is YHWH, your Salvation—as His name means. As St. Peter preached, and you heard 10 days ago,

[L]et it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. This is the “stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.” Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:10-12)

Therefore, do not believe that salvation can be found in you. You, dear hearers, are like the crowds that flocked to John in the region of the Jordan. Brood of vipers! There is nothing you can do to flee from the wrath that is to come. Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves that you have Abraham as your father, that you belong to a Lutheran church, that you have a baptismal certificate lying in your sock drawer, for I tell you that out of the stones God is able to raise up children of Abraham! The ax is laid to the root of the tree; any tree that does not bear fruit worthy of repentance will be cut down and cast into everlasting fire.

That’s the fate for any who believe that they can save themselves. That’s the fate for any who do not repent of their sins. In this, these deny that they are sinners and deny the salvation offered freely by Jesus the Christ, the Lamb of God, who was baptized by John in the Jordan to fulfill all righteousness for them and for you!

Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan shows perfectly how Jesus would save His people from their sins. (cf. Matthew 1:21) Jesus and John showed that in Jesus is all righteousness fulfilled as He performed the saving deeds of YHWH by standing with sinners. In the Jordan, He stood with them as He was baptized as they were, standing in their place! How would Jesus save His people from their sins? By standing in their place under the wrath of God. Ultimately, then, Jesus fulfilled all righteousness as the Lamb of God, dying the sinners’ deaths on the cross outside of Jerusalem. There, with outstretched arms, the Son of God received the wrath of God due the world. Now, those who believe in Him as their salvation, by God-given faith, trust in those arms, as was heard from Isaiah just moments ago.

It is as Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs wrote,

Jesus’ willing Baptism in the Jordan is a sign that points forward. It is a cruciform harbinger, pointing forward to the hidden and unexpected, shockingly weak and vulnerable in-breaking reign of God, to the paradoxical enthronement of the King of the Jews on the cross.

Therefore, it was fitting for Jesus to stand in the Jordan to be baptized by John, for them to fulfill all righteousness, because there He stood in the place of many as on the cross He died in the place of many, shedding His blood as the propitiation for the sins of the world.

Now, placed into those holy wounds, Jesus' people find shelter from the wrath of God as in them there is complete satisfaction for His wrath. Heaven and earth will pass away, but Jesus, who is your righteousness, and in whom you have been placed, dear Baptized, will be forever.

And this is the fruit that you bear worthy of repentance: that you confess your sins—you same-say what God says about you in His Law. "Yes, I am a transgressor." And you plead Jesus, your salvation and your righteousness. "But Jesus bore the fullness of Your wrath on my behalf, O God. He stood in my place." And for His sake, you receive forgiveness, life, and salvation. A blessed exchange indeed: "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (2 Corinthians 5:21) Jesus, the spotless, sinless Lamb of God, He the salvation and righteousness of God, was made to be sin for you, that in Him **you** would become the righteousness of God!

Jesus' Baptism prefigures His cross at which was won your forgiveness, life, and salvation, all of which are washed onto you at your baptisms and to which you are constantly pointed as you live in your baptisms: baptism to cross to baptism. You are in Christ and He in you—the righteousness of God fulfilled for you!

That is to say, dear Baptized, in Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan, God stood in your place. He thereby sanctified and ordained Jordan and all waters for a saving flood and an abundant washing away of sin. (cf. Martin Luther's *Flood Prayer*) In Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan, God revealed Jesus to be your righteousness and salvation when the voice that echoed from heaven declared, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Therefore, in your baptisms, you are washed over in the saving flood with righteousness which is yours in Christ, God's beloved Son. There, at the font, as you were traced with the cross upon forehead and heart to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified, you were declared to be a son of God for the sake of Jesus Christ—in Christ, you are one in whom God is well pleased. Now, you live in your baptisms, a son of God and fellow heir with Jesus Christ of the blessings of life eternal, as by grace through faith you confess your sins and receive absolution, the forgiveness of all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.