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The Baptism of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“The Answer”

Text: Mark 1:4-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Little children in Sunday School quickly learn that if they do not know the answer to a question, then respond with the answer “Jesus!” and they will probably be right – or at least, on the right track. They quickly learn and know that Jesus is the substance and object of our faith and all that we are about as a Church, and therefore, the answer. . . . But then as we grow up, we somehow tend to lose that childlike faith and that childlike answer. We make things complicated. And with this complicated picture then, comes a loss of clarity, so that we no longer know the answer, but suddenly find ourselves *searching* for answers . . . and sometimes not finding them. And then set loose from the anchor of the substance and object of our faith, we find ourselves adrift, searching for direction, at the mercy of the winds of this world blowing here, there, and everywhere.

But there is an answer to that – a way to re-anchor our faith in its proper substance and object and give us the stability and security that we need so much in this life. And to be honest, that answer is something that I knew, but that I also – at the same time – stumbled upon during my time at my church in New York. And it was my wife, actually, who noticed it. And it was this: that after a while, when the adults in my Bible Classes did not know the answer to the question I was asking, they began to always respond with the same one word answer – in a once-again, child-like way, knowing that they would probably be right, or at least on the right track. But now, they didn’t always respond with the answer “Jesus!” Now they responded with this word: Baptism. For although I did not consciously realize I was doing this, they quickly learned and knew that baptism was the foundation of their faith; that baptism anchored them in Christ, the substance and object of their faith. And they were now relying on baptism – not only as an answer, but as their confidence and security. And if you were to ask me what one thing God was able to accomplish through me during my time at that church, I think that is what I would point to.

That is how important Baptism is! It is more than just an initiation rite into the Church. It is more than just a one-time event, but an enduring reality in our lives. For Luther it

was virtually synonymous with the entire Christian life. It is the foundation of who we are and what we are. If you are looking for Jesus, it is in the water of Holy Baptism that you will find Him. Baptism is the foundation sacrament for all other church rites and sacraments. Confirmation is the affirmation of Baptism. Confessional and Absolution is the practice of Baptism. Baptism is our invitation to the wedding feast of Christ here on earth, Holy Communion. By Baptism, the Holy Spirit unites us with the God-man, Jesus Christ, who unites us to His Father. For all of this, Luther could not extol and lift up Baptism enough, encouraging in his Catechisms that everyday – twice a day, every morning and evening – we should make the sign of the cross and remember our baptism. For that is our answer when we don't know the answer, when we are searching for answers – I am baptized.

But, here's the thing. I don't remember my baptism. And I mean that in a couple of ways. First of all, I mean I don't *remember* my baptism! And I'll bet that for most, if not all of you – you don't remember your baptism either. Because I was too small, only almost four months old. I don't remember the water being poured on my head. I don't remember the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit being spoken over me. I don't remember *anything* about that day, only that the certificate hanging on my wall says that on April 7, 1963, I was baptized. *So, how can I look to something that I can't even remember for what I need?* . . . But more importantly, I don't remember my baptism in the sense of remembering it to rely upon it. Even as important and precious as I know baptism is, how many times do I find myself preferring to rely on myself instead, and looking not to my baptism, but to myself for the strength and wisdom and answers I am looking for. Thinking that I got myself into this mess, and I can get myself out of it. Or maybe even worse, that I have to get myself out of it. And by doing that – and I'm sure I'm not alone in this – by doing that, do you realize what we're doing? It's not only a matter of regarding our baptism with indifference, but we're relegating our status as a child of God behind our status as a child of man! And as foolish as that sounds, isn't that what we often do? . . . We don't remember our baptism.

But I suggest to you today that there is a way to remember our baptism – both our baptism physically, and our baptism as something to rely on – and that is through the Holy Gospel that we heard today. To realize that in Jesus' baptism, we see our own. And that in remembering His baptism, we remember our own. And while Mark's account is shorter than that of the other Gospels, he includes three important details about Jesus' baptism that can help us in our understanding and appreciation of our own.

And so first, today we heard that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Even though He had no sins to repent of, no sins to be forgiven of, He was baptized. Not because He needed it, but because we needed it. Because if He had not

been baptized then our baptisms would be empty. For in response to the question in the Catechism, “*How can water do such great things?*” the answer is that “*Certainly not just water, but the word of God in and with the water does these things . . .*” And today, that is what is pictured for us! The Word of God in the water – literally! The Word made flesh, in the water, **for us**. And by seeing Him in the water, **we remember our Baptism** and that He is still *in the water* for us. And we remember that the sins that are washed off of us were put on Him. And so we remember that when He walked up out of that water, it was with all of our sins upon Him, and therefore also with our death sentence upon Him. And so it is that from that moment on, with our sins, He began His relentless journey to the cross. To pay the price not only for the sin of the world, but for my sin.

And then second, Mark tells us about what happened when Jesus was baptized – so that we see not just Jesus at work here, for us and for our salvation, but the work of the entire Holy Trinity. Yes, there is Jesus standing in the water, standing in our stead, taking the place of all sinners. But there is also the voice of the Father, sounding from Heaven His approval of His Son and this work of salvation that He was accomplishing for us. “***You are My beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.***” And then there is the descent of the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, anointing Jesus as the One, the Messiah, the Christ, come to rescue and redeem His people. And seeing this **we remember our Baptism** – that as we are baptized it is the work of the whole Holy Trinity for us. We remember that through these waters we are not only joined to Jesus Christ, we are also anointed by the Holy Spirit, and we receive the approval of the Father. And we remember that baptized into Christ, what was first said of Him is now also said of us: “***You are my beloved son, [my beloved daughter]; with you I am well pleased.***”

But then third, Mark adds yet one more detail here also that we should not overlook – and that is that when Jesus was baptized, “***immediately He saw the heavens opening.***” Now, that English translation does not really do justice to the original Greek, which you’ll get an indication of when I read to you what the actual wording there is. For when Jesus was baptized, Mark says that “***immediately He saw the heavens **skizomnou!*****” Or in other words, they were “***schismmed!***” They weren’t just nicely and daintily opened! They were “***schizoed!***” They were torn asunder, torn in two! And Mark uses that word on purpose, and he’s the only Gospel writer to do so, even though Jesus’ baptism is in all four Gospels. Because he wants to make a point, a connection, with this word – for it is a word that he uses in only one other place – and that is at Jesus’ death. And the connection is that when Jesus died on the cross, it was the curtain in the Temple that was “***schizoed,***” torn in two from top to bottom. For in Christ – in His sacrificial death for us, in His atonement for our sins, in His bringing God and man back together again in the forgiveness of our sins – there is now no longer any separation between us and God. In Christ, we now have free and unfettered access into the Holy of Holies, to the throne of

God. . . . And Mark wants you to know, that is what your baptism means for you today. In Jesus' baptism, see your own. **And remember your baptism** – that when you were baptized, Heaven was torn open to you through the forgiveness of your sins. There is no longer any barrier for you to overcome. Your baptism has not just *promised* you Heaven and eternal life, it has given it to you!

And so Baptism is our answer when we don't know the answer, when we are searching for the answers. **I am baptized.** When you are tormented by your sin, that you can't seem to shake, that keeps haunting your memory, that keeps tugging at your conscience. **No! I am baptized. I am forgiven.** When you are wondering where God is, if He cares, why He is letting things happen to you. **No! I am baptized. I am His dearly loved son.** When you wonder if your prayers are being heard, if God wants to hear from us yet again. **No! I am baptized. He has promised to hear me, as a dear father hears his dear children.** And when your last hour comes, and the devil tries to frighten you with your sin and unworthiness. **No! I am baptized. I am in God's hands, my sin has been paid for, I can rest in peace.** . . . That is our answer when we don't know the answer, when we are searching for answers. The answer is not in us. **I am baptized!**

And do not doubt the power of your baptism, as I think we sometimes – perhaps often times – do. I think we unconsciously, or subconsciously, almost apologize for it, as if because of baptism, God has to accept me now, *whether He likes it or not*. Because I was baptized and got into His Church. . . . But its not like that at all! For He was the One who baptized you. He made you His child. He put you mysteriously and sacramentally into His Son so that Jesus' death and resurrection would be your death and resurrection. So that you would be forgiven. So that you would be His, now and always. He wants to forgive you and have you and love you. And your Baptism is your seal, your guarantee and assurance, that you are *well-pleasing* to your Father. Not because of who you are or what you do, but because of who Christ is and what He has done for you. And so Baptism doesn't just get you in the door, but you may have to sit in the corner because of your sin – No! You have a seat at the Table. A seat of honor. For in baptism, your Father has bound Himself to you in Jesus, and binds us to Himself in Jesus. And in Him, our Saviour, we have a sure hope and refuge. An anchor to hold us safe and secure in the chaos and storms of this life. **I am baptized!** That's the answer, when we don't know the answer.

John Gerhard, one of our Lutheran Fathers from the 16th century, knew this also, and so wrote a prayer of thanksgiving to God for His gift of Holy Baptism. I close now with a portion of that prayer:

“To You, O eternal and merciful God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I give humble thanks, that

You washed me clean from all sins in the holy washing of baptism, received me into the covenant of grace, and appointed me an heir of eternal life. I recognize it as Your gift that, being born of Christian parents, I was brought by them to that heavenly font . . . How great is Your goodness that You found the one who was not yet seeking You; You listened to the one who was not yet praying; You opened the door to the one who was not yet knocking. This Your mercy exceeds all praise, yes, all wonder. I was baptized in Your holy name. Your name was invoked upon me. Indeed, I was received into the heavenly family, [and] made a son of the heavenly Father, a brother of Christ, and a temple of the Holy Spirit. . . . Whatever Christ my Savior merited by His most holy obedience and by the shedding of His precious blood, this all He entrusted to the salutary font of baptism. . . . Through baptism, O eternal God, You established with me an eternal covenant, the return to which always stands open, through true and earnest repentance. . . . For this immeasurable kindness, eternal thanks I give to You, my God.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.