

11 January 2004
The Baptism of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Crossing Over from Death to Life”

Text: Luke 3:21-22

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

On one side of the Jordan River, was the desert; the wilderness. On the other side, was the Promised Land. On the one side, death. On the other side, life. The Jordan River was literally *the line in the sand*.

When God’s people first got to this river, it was after forty years of wandering in the desert. Forty years of going in circles, with no place to call home. Now, they were about to receive a land of their own. . . . God knows they didn’t deserve it! Ever since God brought them up out of their slavery in the land of Egypt, all they did was doubt and complain. They doubted God’s goodness, they doubted His direction, they doubted His ways, and they grumbled whenever they had an opportunity. . . . But God would keep His promise. He would give them this land as their inheritance.

And so on the appointed day, the Ark of God, the Ark of the Covenant, the Ark where God became present and dwelt among His people, entered the Jordan River and opened the door to the Promised Land. The Jordan, which was at flood stage at that time, stopped flowing, and the waters stood up in a heap. And the people passed over from the desert to a land “flowing with milk and honey.” They passed over from death to life. . . . And the promise God gave to Abraham was fulfilled. From one man, God had built a great nation, and given them a home.

And today, we heard **it happened again!**

Once again, Israel is gathered on the banks of the Jordan River. This time its not Moses or Joshua leading them, but John the Baptist. And gathered are a people who God knows don’t deserve His favor! They are sinners gathered there, having been called to repentance by the thunderous voice and preaching of John. His words had cut them to the heart, revealing their deepest, darkest shames and secrets. They had broken the Law of God. All of them, all of it. They were dying and needed life. And where do you go to pass over from death to life but to the Jordan River.

But the door to life would remain closed, had God not once again stepped in and opened the door to the Promised Land. And God did just that as Jesus, the ark of the New Testament, the Word made flesh, God dwelling with His people, steps into the Jordan. Only this time, it is not the waters of the River that are split open and torn asunder – opened is heaven itself! For in this One, in Jesus, Heaven is opened. In Jesus, the Way to the Promised Land of Heaven is prepared. And once again, the promise God gave to Abraham is fulfilled – that one of Abraham’s seed would be the Saviour of all men.

And so the Baptism of Jesus is no small thing that we remember and celebrate this day; and no small thing that Luke recorded in his Gospel, although he uses few words and describes the scene, as Luther would say, very *unartistically*! But do not let the simplicity fool you. What happened in the Jordan that day has great implications for you and me and our eternal life.

For crossing through the waters from death to life isn’t something that just happened at the time of Joshua and John – **it happens again and again**, here, for us.

Because you and I were born in sin. We inherited it, and there’s nothing you could do about that. And that means that we were born into the desert of slavery and death. And in this desert, we are like God’s people in the Old Testament – we doubt and complain. We doubt God’s goodness, His plans, and His ways. We grumble when things don’t live up to our expectations, or we think we deserve better, and easier, and more. And in this desert, we are like God’s people at the time of John the Baptist – sinners through and through, who have broken the Law of God. All of us, all of it. And if left in this condition, we would die. . . . But the voice of John the Baptist has called us to repentance, and to the Jordan River. And God has come to rescue us from our slavery to sin and death, and to take us into the Promised Land of Heaven. And this He does for us through the water – in Holy Baptism.

For in Holy Baptism God and the water are joined together and become for us the means of God’s grace and forgiveness. If Jesus had not stepped into the Jordan that day, but had instead decided, “*No, I’d rather not*” – then our baptism would be meaningless and empty. A mere ritual, washing dirt off of the outside of our bodies. . . . But once Jesus stepped into that river and submitted Himself to be baptized – even though He had no need of baptism; even though He had no sins to repent of – His baptism meant that Heaven would be open for you and me. And so after He is baptized, this is what happens. Heaven is opened, the Holy Spirit descends freely upon Him in the form of a dove, and the voice of the Father announces: “***You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.***”

And so as Jesus is baptized for you and me, He makes baptism, baptism. He empowers the baptism that He commands His Church to give to all nations by putting Himself in it. And so when we are baptized it is no empty ritual or outward washing, but a participation in Christ Himself. We are joined to Him and He to us, so that all that is ours becomes His and all that is His becomes ours. He takes our sin and gives us His perfection. He takes our death and gives us His life. He takes our slavery and gives us His Sonship. And so when you were baptized into Him and His Name, baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, heaven was opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon you, and His Father became your Father, who said to you, ***“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”***

Martin Luther, in teaching of baptism, asked the question: *How can water do such great things?* And the answer said: *“Certainly not just water, but the Word of God in and with the water does these things.”* Indeed, it is the Word of God made flesh in the water that does great things for us. And this was simply the beginning. For *everything* Jesus did He did **for us**. Nothing for Himself; everything **for us**. And so He is born **for us**, He is circumcised **for us**, He fulfills the Law **for us**. He is baptized **for us**, tempted **for us**, and lives perfectly **for us**. And then He is crucified **for us**, becomes sin **for us**, and bleeds **for us**. And then that all might be accomplished **for us**, He is raised from the dead **for us**, and ascends into Heaven **for us**. And all of this only that we might be forgiven and saved. That we might cross over from death into life. That we need no longer live in the desert of sin and death, but in a Promised Land of milk and honey.

Now that doesn't mean that everything is going to be milk and honey for you now, as you live in this life. You know that its not. We're not living in the Promised Land of Heaven yet! But it does mean that in the midst of all that happens in this world, you can rest secure, knowing that you have already passed over from death into life with your Saviour Jesus Christ. What happens in this world is no sure sign of God's favor or His displeasure with you. If we try to measure our relationship to God by virtue of an easy life, or having all that we want, or freedom from sadness, or any other purely subjective and constantly changing criteria, we will never be at rest. We will never know.

But we do know. We know, because our relationship with God is not based upon anything in this world that we might deem “good” or “bad,” but solely on Jesus Christ. On the objective, historical reality of His incarnation, His baptism, and His death and resurrection. There you see the love of God for you. There you see your sin dealt with and forgiven. There you see the length and breadth and depth and height that God is willing to go for you. And if He has done this for you, will He not also give you everything else that you need?

Soon enough our time will come when we are removed from this world and live with Christ in His Promised Land. Soon enough. Then we will see clearly. Then our joy will be complete. . . . *Until* then, do what He says: eat His Body, drink His Blood, and listen to His Word. That will be your strength, your refuge, your fortress, and your might. That will see you through to the coming Day. It will comfort and console. It will feed and nourish. It will endure. It is all that you need. For you are baptized. Not: you *were* baptized! But you *are* baptized! ***“You are [His] beloved Son; with you [He] is well pleased.”*** That is the reality you live in. An ongoing reality and relationship, for God keeps His promises.

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

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