

Grace, mercy, and peace are yours in abundance through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” **This is God’s Word.**

Dear Friends,

If you’ve ever seen or read or participated in a play you know that plays are usually divided up into different sections. The different acts and scenes in a play are kind of like chapters in a book, but they serve another special purpose. When the curtain closes at the end of a scene people rush around behind it to set the stage for the next one. Maybe one scene takes place indoors in a library and the next one outside in a garden, and so props have to be added and rearranged before the next scene can begin. As all this is going on behind the curtain, often a narrator will speak to the audience to give them some details on what’s going to happen next. Then the curtain opens and the play continues.

That’s really a good description of what’s going on in today’s Gospel lesson. As we consider this portion of scripture it is like watching a new part of the play unfold before our eyes. We just finished the season of Christmas – the scene before us was baby Jesus in the manger and then the curtain closes. There have been many years of silence as that baby grows and matures into an adult. As the curtain opens, Jesus is approaching John the Baptist at the Jordan River. John is busy preaching and baptizing. As we watch this scene unfold we are going to witness two things, **“The Son accepting the work of salvation,”** and **“The Father accepting the Worker of salvation.”**

I. The event recorded in this portion of scripture didn’t happen by chance. Matthew tells us, **“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.”** John had a very active ministry. Many people were coming out to hear his message and the Holy Spirit worked through that message to prompt the people to repent and to be baptized by John. Sometimes we might get the impression that when Jesus came to John it was only the two of them but chances are that there was a crowd to hear the discussion between John and Jesus and to witness Jesus’ baptism. Even though John’s ministry was going well, it was time for him to fade into the background. He had completed his mission and prepared the way for the promised Messiah. And now, Jesus was here and his baptism would be another step toward God’s fulfillment of his promise to Adam and Eve to send a Savior.

“But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” John recognized his need for a Savior, but I’m not sure just how much he knew about Jesus. Jesus didn’t argue with John. What he said was true – John needed the salvation that was at the heart of his own message but there was more going on here that John didn’t recognize at

the moment. **“Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then John consented.”**

“Let it be so now.” With this command Jesus is telling John that his baptism is necessary. That’s the way it has to be to **“fulfill all righteousness.”** The baptism of Christ was to signal the beginning of his public ministry but it was more than that. Jesus was our substitute in every way. He himself, was without sin but he was bearing the sins of the world already at his baptism and so as our substitute, bearing our sins, he was baptized.

This wasn’t an empty ceremony with superficial significance. It was a necessary part of God’s plan for our salvation. The baptism of Christ signals a transition in his ministry that starts his journey to the cross to pay for the sins of the world – yours and mine included.

To look at it from a different angle – God’s demand of righteousness involves two things, actually two sides of the same coin. On one hand, a person has to keep the commandments perfectly to be righteous in God’s eyes. On the other, a person can’t have any sinfulness whatsoever. If he does, he faces God’s righteous anger and punishment. I don’t have to tell you how you stand on either side – you know. As we consider the scene before us, Jesus implies that he had fulfilled *part*, but not *all* of God’s righteous demands.

He had lived a perfect, holy, sinless life. We call that Christ’s ACTIVE OBEDIENCE. What still needed to be taken care of was the atonement for the sins that already had been and were being and would be committed. When Jesus was baptized, it was his transition into his work of PASSIVE OBEDIENCE. In his baptism, he officially set himself on the same level as the people whom he came to save – sinners. His baptism signified the beginning of his public ministry but his ministry had been going on since his birth; he’d been living a sinless life in our place from day one. His baptism did signify the beginning of his passive obedience as he took on the persecution and humility and suffering – OUR persecution and humility and suffering – that ultimately led him to bear our cross and condemnation.

Because **“he who had no sin became sin for us,”** Jesus stooped to a sinner’s baptism. And when Jesus explained this, John willingly consented. In this scene, **“The Son accepted the work of salvation.”** The rest of our text gives us just as much reason to rejoice. There we see how **“The Father accepted the Worker of salvation.”**

II. It isn’t necessary for us to hear about the actual baptism – whether Jesus was completely immersed under the water or whether John just poured water over Jesus’ head, but what comes after Jesus’ baptism is important. **“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him.”** Our second lesson this morning points out the significance of the dove descending and lighting on him. Luke tells us, **“You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power,”** (Acts 10:37-38). The Old Testament lesson sheds some light on this event also. **“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.”** (Is 42:1). As the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove, Jesus was anointed for

the work still needed to complete God's plan of salvation. It's no accident that the Holy Spirit came in the form of a dove because the dove is a symbol of peace and Jesus would bring peace by bringing forgiveness. He would bring justice by enduring the punishment God demands for our sin. And he would do it willingly because he loves us and this is his Father's plan for our salvation.

That's why the next thing to happen is, **"A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."** God identifies his Son for us and acknowledges his Son's willingness to carry out God's plan of salvation. Jesus is not alone. Our God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united in this perfect plan of salvation – a showering of God's grace and love on us sinners so that we can have forgiveness, peace, and joy.

Thus, Jesus steps up onto dry land with the full authority of God's Anointed, the Savior. How often Jesus' enemies questioned his authority! But Jesus always countered those arguments by saying his Father approved and authorized his person and plans, and that John the Baptist was his reliable witness.

How important the words of our text are to our faith! We see how Jesus became one with us so that he might live in our place as our Savior. He willingly took up our sins and willingly accepted the path of suffering that the Father had mapped out for him. But that work would have been worthless if God the Father hadn't counted his Son's perfect life as ours and his Son's holy death as our own.

Because God was well-pleased with Jesus, he can say the same of you and me. Because he accepted his Son's work, he accepts us as his dear children. During the next few months we will continue to study the rest of the story (this scene as it may be) and anticipate the next scene. As we do that we will stay focused on Christ and see how he sets the stage for his glory and ours. Amen.