

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.

"When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him."

There was a time in the past, before Jesus came up out of the waters of the Jordan, when the windows of heaven were opened. At that time, when heaven opened, the wrath of God was poured out, in a very literal sense. At that time, YHWH had seen "that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And YHWH was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart." (Genesis 6:5-6) God had resolved at that point to start over, essentially. He was going to destroy everything that He had created on the face of the earth, expressing regret at having created that which he had, just a few generations previously, called very good.

But there was one man who found grace in the sight of God. This man was just, "perfect in his generation," the Scriptures say. The man, Noah, walked with God. You could say that Noah knew God in a way similar to Adam, something not seen in generations. Noah had a wife and three sons; his three sons were also married.

YHWH spoke to Noah and told him what He was going to do. He then commanded Noah to build an ark of gopherwood in which he would take his family and two of each kind of animal. God was going to bring floodwaters upon the earth in judgment against the wickedness of mankind. But God would establish His covenant with Noah. God was starting over, but He wouldn't forget the promise made to the serpent: "And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel." (Genesis 3:15)

The time had come. The floodwaters were about to be upon the earth, and God tells Noah and his family to enter the ark. YHWH shut them in. That's when it happened. That's when the heavens were opened, and the wrath of God poured out. "In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened. And the rain was on the earth forty days and forty nights." (Genesis 7:11-12)

By water was destroyed all the great wickedness of man upon the earth. The just man, Noah, and his family were saved from the flood in the Ark—eight souls in all. The windows of heaven were opened (as were the fountains of the deep), and the waters poured upon the earth, wiping out creation, spare that which was on the Ark (and presumably many of the swimming sea creatures).

In today's Gospel text, Jesus had made His way to John at the Jordan to be baptized. After some discussion, John performed upon Jesus the same baptism he had been giving everyone else who had come to him. Down into the same Jordan river water went Jesus, the same waters into which all of those dirty sinners had gone. Up from the waters Jesus came, and the heavens were opened to Him.

Here is Jesus, the fulfillment of the promise made to the serpent in the Garden. Jesus is the Seed of the woman sent to crush the devil's head, and His baptism in the Jordan is but one of the steps Jesus took in order to do so. Jesus, the perfect Son of God, goes down into the Jordan river to receive the baptism of repentance—He who had no need to repent of anything—in order to fulfill all righteousness.

It's a seemingly strange thing to hear that Jesus **needed** to be baptized in order fulfill all

righteousness, but there is no getting around what Jesus told John. Jesus demonstrated by His baptism just how it is that He would save His people from their sins. He went down into the same waters that many had gone down into before, and into which many since Him would also go down into to receive baptism. Jesus literally stood in the place of many.

As Jesus came out of those same waters, the heavens were opened to Him, and the Spirit of God descended upon Him like a dove. A voice thundered from heaven, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Jesus stood in the place of many as that voice thundered from heaven. It was speaking to and of Jesus, but it's not a stretch to say that, since Jesus was standing there in the place of many, the voice was calling out to the many in whose place Jesus stood.

Ultimately, Jesus would take the place that many—read, all—deserved. Following Jordan and the wilderness and a few years walking around the region of Galilee and Judea, Jesus made His way to Jerusalem and took the place of all upon the cross.

You see, God still looked down and saw that the wickedness of man is great upon the earth and every intent of his heart is only evil continually. That's what John was baptizing away from the people. The people would go out to John, confess this wickedness and evil and the wrong they had done, and receive the baptism of repentance. Like father Noah before, these many saw their wickedness and evil, too, and saw no way out from under it in and of themselves. However, just as every lamb slain on the altar of the temple did not remove those sins from the people, neither did this baptism of repentance. Lambs needed to be slain continually, and John's baptism was likely a ritual performed over and over again in order for forgiveness to be procured again and again.

So YHWH sent His Lamb as the Seed of the woman. Upon the cross, Jesus is the Lamb of God slain once for all, where His heel was bruised as He removed from the devil his authority and dominion over the lives of men. Hearts may be inclined toward evil, but that evil no longer condemns the one who is in Christ. That's because the condemnation was already meted out on the cross; there, as Jesus hung dying, heaven was opened again, and the full wrath of God against the great wickedness and evil of mankind, even as He forsook His Son, was leveled against the Seed of the woman.

And unlike the sacrifices before, Jesus' sacrifice completely removes your sinfulness from you. You hear it in the words of St. Paul, "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) Therefore,

Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:12-14)

But the question should be raised, "How does this apply to you?" How does this get applied to you? Well, once again, God looks down, and He peers even into your hearts and sees there only great wickedness and evil continually. Your hearts of flesh are continually turned against God, not inclined to anything godly or holy. In the flesh of your hearts, you seek only your own gratification, even at the injurious expense of others; there is no service toward others, but only malcontent and malice. What's to keep God from exacting His righteous wrath against you?

Well, first, bear in mind that there was One who stood in *your* place. He took your place under the wrath of God as He died your death for sin on the cross. He stood in your place in the waters of the Jordan to receive the baptism of repentance. The heavens were opened to Him, in wrath and in peace—in wrath for you and in peace with you. That is to say, that since He received the full wrath of God in your place, there is therefore now no wrath for you and Jesus is the peace of God for you—He is your

peace with God.

Now, since there was a time when Jesus stood under opened heavens for you, recall that there was a time when once, the heavens were opened to you, also. Just as the wrath of God poured out upon the earth at the flood, whereat Noah and his family were saved upon the Ark, there is an antitype to the flood and the Ark which now saves you: baptism. (cf. 1 Peter 3:21) Jesus identified with you in your flesh and in the flood of baptism. Now, your baptism into Christ saves you! There, at those blessed waters, you died to sin. You were drowned, as it were, for your wickedness and the evil intentions of your heart, having received, as St. Paul put it, a circumcision of the heart. (cf. Romans 2:29) There, at those blessed waters, you, personally, were joined to Jesus' death and resurrection. His death for sin is yours, and to you, personally, is given the merits of His life, death, and resurrection—they are namely forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation.

Because, after you were drowned in those waters, you rose again to newness of life. A New Man rose from the grave of the font, and as you came up out of those waters, the heavens were opened to you, you received the gift of the Spirit, and the voice declared to you, "You are My Son, in whom I am well pleased."

The sad state you now find yourself in, though, is part and parcel of being a part of this side of eternity. While you are now in Christ, you still live with a heart of flesh. This is the famous *simul* that you confess being Lutheran. You are at the same time saint and sinner. You are a saint for the sake of the work of Christ and your baptism into Christ (which, don't get me wrong, is His work, too). You are a sinner for the sake of your flesh.

This leaves you with something yet to do. But, by the grace of God, you gladly do it—well, your New Man does. It's a recollection of your baptism, a recalling of your being joined to Christ, a remembrance of the sacrifice that Jesus has made for your sins. For, by the grace of God, you confess your transgressions against His Law, your struggles against His holiness, your evil and the wickedness that still resides in your flesh. And you are turned back to look at all that He has done for you—recall Jesus' life, His baptism, and His death—that is, remember the satisfaction that He has made for your sins and for all sins. You are also turned back to look at all that He has done to you—recall your own baptism into His death and resurrection—that is, remember that once Jesus was numbered with you in order that you would be numbered with Him, a son of God and fellow heir of eternal life.

So, you confess your sins. In fact, you just did a little while ago. This is given to you by your Father in heaven, who has made you a new creature in the likeness and image of Christ. And just as happened at your baptism, the heavens are opened to you and you hear the voice of Jesus call out to you through His pastor: you are forgiven for all of your sins.

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