

The Baptism of Our Lord  
St. Matthew 3:13-17; Joshua 3:1-3, 7-8, 13-17

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

You probably know the story well enough. You heard part of it this morning. And while it is certainly not as grand a story as the parting and crossing of the Red Sea, it has similar elements, and there is similar typology involved. This is how Joshua led the people of Israel through the Jordan and into the Promised Land.

The Children of Israel arrived beyond the Jordan from their 40-year exodus in the wilderness. They camped near the eastern bank of the River Jordan, north of the Dead or Salt Sea at a place that came to be called Bethabara, or "Place of Crossing." When the time had come, God told Joshua to cross the Jordan, to have the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant set foot in the Jordan, and the waters would part so that the whole company could cross over on dry ground. This they did, and the Children of Israel set foot in the Promised Land.

Joshua himself was commanded to have a man from each tribe pick a stone from the riverbed. From these twelve stones a monument was made at the place where they next camped: Gilgal. These had to have been large stones, for they were commanded,

Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, "What do those stones mean to you?" then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever. (Joshua 4:5-7)

And those twelve stones, which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. And he said to the people of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in times to come, 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall let your children know, 'Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.' For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever. (Joshua 4:20-24)

Furthermore, twelve more stones were placed as a monument in the middle of the river where the Children of Israel crossed.

The story was told again and again. Children would point to the stones at Gilgal and ask, "What does this mean?" Parents would tell their children the story of how the waters were parted, how the Children of Israel passed through the Jordan, how they finally made it into the land that God had promised to give them—how they had left behind the wilderness and all of its hardships and killings and that land of sin and slavery and entered into the land of life and bread and iron and copper. (cf. Deuteronomy 8:9) In short, they Children of Israel passed through the waters from death to life!

So, when I say that the crossing of the Jordan is a type of Baptism, you can see how that works. For you, yourselves has passed over from death to life by way of the waters of the font. Now, this font, and many like it, may never have or may never in the future contain Jordan water, but for your sake, the source of the water isn't important, and that's because your Baptism is connected to that of your Savior, Jesus Christ.

It was to the Jordan that Christ the Lord went in order to be Baptized by John. Here's where things really get interesting. According to John the Evangelist, the location that John was baptizing as Jesus arrived was "in Bethany across the Jordan." (cf. John 1:28) Where is this? Well, the name has changed slightly, but it's all there in that phrase from St. John's Gospel. The place where John was baptizing was at Bethabara, the place of crossing.

It was no coincidence that John was baptizing there with a baptism of repentance, but was chosen deliberately. Remember the stones in and across the river? They served as a reminder of the people of the work of God to bring the people out of bondage. The bondage then was slavery, but as John was baptizing with a baptism of repentance, the bondage he had in mind was to sin.

So, as it happened, before Jesus arrived, John spoke to the Pharisees and Sadducees who were coming to his baptism.

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 3:7-10)

God's wrath is coming, and it is inescapable. If there would be anyone guilty of not repenting of sin, it would be the Pharisees and Sadducees, who thought themselves sinless, though I'm sure at times you might include yourself in that group. Remember, it was of them that Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." (Luke 15:31-32) So, John's message was as much for them as it was for everyone who came to him at Bethany across the Jordan. "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. What greater place than this, where the bonds of slavery were removed from the Children of Israel and they crossed from death into life?"

And what about "these stones." It's fascinating that that phrase is used both in Joshua and Matthew—these stones. That might be an indication that John was using either the monument at Gilgal or the twelve stones in the Jordan to make his point to the Pharisees and Sadducees. "God is able from *these stones* to raise up children for Abraham." The prospect of that is exciting, if you ask me. John points to a set of twelve stones, a reminder of God's providence and mightiness, and tells them God can make from them His own children.

Anyway, to this spot—this spot from Joshua 3 and 4—Jesus, whose name in Hebrew is Joshua, arrives to be baptized, in order for He and John to fulfill all righteousness. Down into this spot in the River Jordan the two men descend, the place where the Children of Israel passed through on dry land, and place where, for all rights, had they done so without divine providence, they should have all drowned and died, and Jesus takes that death for them, and comes out of the water as their very life. But, He comes out of the water as your very life, too.

Remember that I said that your baptism is connected to His. In every step of Jesus' life, He was fulfilling the Law and all righteousness for you, and that includes His baptism. He and John go down into the River Jordan at the place of crossing for you. He did it with you in mind and carrying you in His own flesh and blood, only to come out of the water to the words thundering from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." So, if you are there with Him, by way of your own baptism into His death and resurrection, then those words are as much speaking of you as they are of Him.

So, while you may have been baptized in this font or one quite like it, with water poured from this or another tap, with Christ you have been baptized in the River Jordan at the place of crossing. Your baptism is connected to His by way of His word and command—for it is the Word of God which makes this washing the sacred thing that it is—Jesus entered the Jordan for and with you, and tells you to be baptized in His name for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. And it is because of the

command and Word of Christ that Luther included this sentence in his flood prayer: "Through the Baptism in the Jordan of Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, You sanctified and instituted all waters to be a blessed flood, and a lavish washing away of sin."

Because Jesus was baptized for you, your baptism now grants you everything that His perfect life, death, and resurrection earned. So, by way of your baptism, God reached down and turned your dead heart of stone into a living heart of faith and life and the Voice from heaven declared, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." At this font or one like it, you passed through the River Jordan on dry ground, passing from your bondage to sin the freedom in Christ, from the death of the wrath of God to life everlasting for the sake of Christ. For, just as with the Children of Israel, without divine providence, you should be drowned and die yourself with your sin and all evil desire, but God has instituted baptism for a saving flood for you for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Once you were enemies of God, but in Christ you have been reconciled. Once, you lived on the east side of the Jordan, lost in sin and death, but in Christ, you have been crossed over to freedom and life. And while it is so easy to plunge back into death and enmity—to succumb to one sin or another, to lose yourself in one vice or another—remember this, you are still covered in the blood of the Lamb, the one that John pointed to at Bethany across the Jordan, and proclaimed him to be the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29)

You are one of those stones that John pointed to and said, "God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham." The Sunday School kids get it right: "Father Abraham had many sons; many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord!" So, if you ever find yourself at Gilgal or Bethany across the Jordan, find that pile of stones, and see in them the Lord's promise to you. Remember that you were brought through water to the Promised Land of peace with God and salvation. You have been taken out of death to life for the sake of Jesus Christ. The Father has said of you, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Jesus Christ was baptized there at Bethany across the Jordan for you and with you—into this you have been baptized, and you are forgiven for all of your sins.

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