

“Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

In the Name of the One Holy and Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ is an event recorded in the synoptic gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke, and referred to in John. Clearly God wants us to know that this is an important event in the life and career of Christ. Thus, the church has set aside the First Sunday after the Epiphany every year for us to focus on the Baptism of our Lord.

This event comes up early in each of the four gospels, since this baptism really marks the launching of Christ’s public ministry. From here in the Jordan, Jesus will set out to do what He came to do, which is to bring in the kingdom of heaven by saving His people from their sins. This is Jesus’ inauguration day, the day when He takes up His office as the promised Messiah. The Spirit comes upon Jesus, anointing Him with power and blessing for the performance of His office. The Father’s voice attests to Jesus as His beloved Son, with whom He is well pleased – His chosen one, in whom He delights.

The other gospel writers, Mark, Luke, and John bring out these points about the Spirit’s descent and the Father’s voice, as does Matthew in our text today. But it is only in Matthew’s account that we find the little dialogue that goes on between John the Baptist and Jesus, before John consents to baptize Him. And this dialogue answers the question as to why Jesus was baptized.

First, let us set the scene and see what was going on when Jesus comes to be baptized. John was baptizing lots of people at the Jordan River at that time. He was preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” And people from all around were heeding that message, and coming to John at the Jordan, to be baptized. They were confessing their sins.

There were also some others, Pharisees and Sadducees, coming out to see what was going on. Whether or not they actually wanted to be baptized is not known, since John called them out and stopped them in their tracks; “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance!” John spoke of a coming end-time judgment as well as an end-time salvation, and he saw both connected to the person coming after him, the Mightier One, whose sandals he was not worthy to carry. John was speaking, of course, of Christ.

Now here comes Jesus, the Mightier One Himself. Only Jesus is not coming as the mighty end-time Judge. He is not wielding an axe to chop down trees or carrying His winnowing fork in His hand to cast the chaff into the fire. He is not coming as the Mighty Lord. Instead, He comes as just another Israelite, needing to be baptized. This throws John off. He does not understand. This does not compute.

John would have prevented it, because he knew that Jesus did not have any sins to repent. That is what threw John off. Why would Jesus need to be baptized? He was no sinner.

However, in the presence of Jesus' holiness and sinlessness, John is painfully aware of his own unholiness and sinfulness. "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me? John asks incredulously.

How is it with me and you? Are we aware of our own sinfulness, as John was of his? Yet here was John, a man set apart for the Lord and filled with the Holy Spirit from before his birth declaring his need in this way.

But Jesus, No way! That is why John tries to prevent Him. Jesus is gently insistent and answers John, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness." What does Jesus mean by this?

He starts by saying, "Let it be so for now." In other words, permit it at this time. Jesus was saying, for right now, I have something else to do. In fact, what I am about to do will lead to that final end-time judgment and salvation? It is necessary for me to do what I am about to do to get to that final point. It is just going to take a different route from what you were expecting. Bear with me on this, John. I know what I am doing.

Jesus continues, "For it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness." "It is proper." It is proper that I am being baptized in this way, standing with sinners. This is how I am going to save these sinners, by standing with them, acting as their substitute. Remember what the angel told Joseph before he was born, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." And now, here comes Jesus 30 years later living up to His name. He is embarking on His saving mission. That is why this baptism is so proper.

"Let it be so for now, for it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness." The Old Testament speaks much about God's righteousness in examples such as these: The psalmist prays: "In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me"; and My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all the day." Likewise, the prophet Jeremiah foresees the day when the Messiah will come and execute righteousness in the land, and the people will be saved, and his name will be called "The Lord is our righteousness." These Old Testament passages are all fulfilled in Christ.

And this is why Jesus can say that His being baptized and setting out on His mission in this way is proper to “fulfill all righteousness.”

God’s righteousness is shown in keeping His promise, in His acting in history to deliver on His promises by delivering us from our sins. This is what Christ has come to do, and now it begins in earnest, here at His baptism. What is so proper about this is that it is precisely in His standing in for sinners that Christ will accomplish this. Just as the Father voiced His approval of Christ at His baptism, so the Father will approve of Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross, when the Father then raises Christ from the dead on the third day.

All of this now – God’s righteousness, Christ’s substitutionary death, His resurrection, God’s forgiveness and eternal salvation – all of this gets delivered to us in our baptism. In the waters of Holy Baptism we were joined to the Jesus who stood in the waters of the Jordan and stood in our place on the cross.

Do we need to be baptized by Christ, as John the Baptist confessed? Well, yes we do. That is what Christ has done when He baptized us. All our sins were washed away, by virtue of the man standing in the river and going to the cross. The Spirit of God came down on us, giving us a new heart, bestowing God’s favor and blessing upon us. The Father’s voice came from heaven declaring us to be His beloved children. In our baptism we are joined to Jesus, connected to Christ in His death and resurrection, buried with Him and raised with Him in his resurrection. We are new people by baptism. We have a real purpose in our lives and a bright hope ahead of us. It is a great thing to be baptized by Christ.

“To fulfill all righteousness.” That is why it was proper for Jesus to be baptized. For this righteousness, God’s righteousness, is fulfilled as Jesus goes forward from the Jordan to save us from our sins and to bring us all the blessings of the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, that is a proper way for us to think of the Baptism of Our Lord and live in the joy and blessings of our own baptism.

Amen!