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## The First Sunday after Epiphany

### *The Baptism of Our Lord*

January 9, 2022

#### Revealed as God's Chosen One

At his baptism, Jesus was revealed by God as the Chosen One, the Savior who would fulfill God's promises to conquer the enemy of sin. His baptism in the Jordan brings power and legitimacy to our lives as the children of God and the witnesses of his grace.

#### Sermon

#### Luke 3:15-18, 21-22

**The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.**

**When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."**

So what did John know and when did he know it?

John the Baptist is one of the most intriguing characters in the Bible. His birth was promised before he was conceived; an angel told his father-to-be. His birth was a miracle; his mother was way past child-bearing age. At a certain point in his life, he left home and headed to the wilderness. When he came back to the Jordan River, he brought the wilderness with him. He wore clothes made of camel's hair and ate grasshoppers and wild honey.

Did John know who he was? For sure. The angel told his father that this son would **go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.** When he was born, his father sang to him, **You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him.**

Did John know what he was supposed to do? Absolutely. His mission was to get people thinking about spiritual things, to stop obsessing over ethics and politics. His preaching would level proud sinners and his baptism would raise up repentant sinners. People needed to focus on their relationship with God when Messiah came.

Did John have a sense of his relationship with Messiah? He did. In the Gospel for today you heard him tell the people: **I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.** At another time John said, **I am not the Messiah, but am sent ahead of him...He must become greater; I must become less.**

Did John understand what Messiah would do? John knew the Old Testament as well as anyone. He knew all the promises and prophecies; he probably knew them by heart. And he summarized them all when he said in today's Gospel: **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor**

**and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.** Messiah would launch a new era in the history of planet earth. Messiah would bring to the world the full power of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit—and with them he would destroy Satan and purify sinners. He would gather together all who believed in him and he would punish forever all those who did not.

Did John know who Messiah was? Did he know that his cousin Jesus was Messiah? Good question. He could have known. His mother knew. When Mary came to visit Elizabeth, she knew that Mary's son was the one God had promised. Elizabeth surely told him that he had jumped in her womb when he encountered Messiah for the first time. But that was 30 years ago. Jesus and John probably never met; they lived far apart. John was in the wilderness for most of his adult life while Jesus was growing up in Nazareth. John admitted later: **I myself did not know him.** For a long time, John preached and baptized—he **exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them**—even though he wasn't exactly sure who Messiah was.

What convinced him? He can tell you himself: **The one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'** OK. And so then the day came. **When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."** When John saw that, he was ready to say, **I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One.** And he pointed to Jesus and said, **Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!** What did John know? He knew that his cousin Jesus was the man God had chosen to save the world. And when did he know it? He became convinced when he baptized Jesus in the Jordan.

Do you ever wish that you could be absolutely convinced about this religious stuff? I mean it happens to us sometimes, not a lot, but sometimes. Will I really see that person I loved in heaven someday? Why did she have to die when she was so young? Why does he have to go through so much pain? I go to church, I bring my offering, I volunteer. Is it really worth it? Does any of this count? Does God really forgive me? Is there something better after this or do we just live and die? We kind of put those questions away because we're supposed to know better, but they seem to come back. We're not alone. People in our world wallow and drown in uncertainty. Some bow to Mecca five times a day. Some light candles for dead ancestors. Some try to be better than others and some pray their rosaries. Everybody wants to be sure. So do we. We want to be certain. We want the doubts to go away.

A modest young man, age 30, walked down to the shores of the Jordan River. He was pretty inconspicuous. There were people ahead of him and people behind him. He waited for his turn and he stood quietly and prayed. John pushed his shoulders under the water and all at once—all at once **heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."** No one saw it and no one heard it except for Jesus and John and now us. We see and we hear it. This is what the coronation does when it anoints the monarch: it pours the oil of choice. This is what the media does when it calls the election: it certifies the winner. This is what football does with "touchdown" or what baseball does with "safe." But this is God and there is no pretender to the throne and no uncounted votes and no instant replay. As the hymn says, "The Father's Word, the Spirit's flight anointed Christ in glorious sight as God's own choice, from Adam's fall to save the world and free us all." We are sure about Jesus because God said so at his baptism.

So what does Jesus' baptism have to do with our baptism? **I baptize you with water,** John said. **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** John's baptism cleansed repentant sinners; it was a washing with water and promise. But John's baptism looked ahead to a promise that was coming. The baptism Jesus brought looked back to a promise that has been kept. Jesus didn't need to be baptized. He had no sins to repent of; no sins to be washed away. Jesus stepped into the Jordan to be us. And he didn't stop being us. He lived perfectly and supplied our obedience; he died innocently and endured our punishment. Because Jesus stood in for us, our baptism with water is a baptism of the Spirit and fire that refines us and purifies us and cleans us out. It takes away our sin because Jesus took away our sin. St. Paul wrote in the Second Reading: **When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.**

So you have been baptized. Someone, probably a minister, put a little water on your head and said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And then it was done. But it wasn't done, not really. Jesus washed away your sins then and he washes away your sins now. He connected you to his death then and he does the same now. He joined you to his resurrection then, and he joins you to it now. No matter what you do or how far you fall, Jesus is still there for you. And you can be sure about Jesus because at his baptism God said: **This is my Son whom I love. With him I am well pleased. We live from Jesus' baptism to our baptism.**

John the Baptist didn't last long after this. He condemned King Herod's adultery and King Herod had him beheaded. But John's work was done. But other people followed Jesus and their work wasn't done. He taught them and trained them: **You will be my witnesses, Jesus said, in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.** Sometimes they understood and sometimes they didn't get it at all. After he rose from the dead, Jesus promised help: **Wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.** And so the day came. **Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.** The Day of Pentecost. In sound and in sight Jesus sent the Spirit and fire and chose his followers to preach the gospel to every creature.

The wind and the flames are gone. The Day of Pentecost has passed. But the power of Pentecost has not passed. Still today Jesus is baptizing us with the Spirit and fire. We are still his choice to tell the world. He is still equipping us to be his witnesses. He makes us eager to work, he provides courage to speak, he gives us money to share, he promises success in our labor. Jesus still sends Pentecostal power and he sends it to us.

Jesus was the one God choose to complete his plan to save the world. And Jesus was the one God chose to baptize us with the Spirit and fire. In the baptism that is with water, he makes us his children and forgives our sins and he does that every day. In the baptism that is Pentecost, he makes us his witnesses and equips us to tell and he does that every day. And so in what we are as his children and in what we do as his witnesses, we live from the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. We can be sure! Amen.