

“A Beautiful, Glorious Exchange”

Matthew 3:13-17

On Friday January 6, the church marked the Day of Epiphany – the coming of the wise men. Traditionally, on the Sunday after Epiphany, the church celebrates the Baptism of our Lord – which is an often overlooked major event in the life of the church. It is a big day on the church year calendar. Whenever I wear white or red, major things are happening.

This day marks the beginning of Christ’s ministry on earth. During the Epiphany Season, our Gospel lessons tell us about Christ’s preaching, and teaching, and miracles. An “Epiphany” is when something is revealed to you that prior to that “Epiphany” you had not seen or noticed.

During the Epiphany Season, we are retold of the events that occurred during Christ’s life that revealed to the world who Jesus Christ was. The first of these events in Christ’s adult life is His Baptism.

At times, we are reminded of the overwhelmingly destructive power of water: a flood, a tsunami, a hurricane. This morning, as we consider Christ’s Baptism, and our own Baptism, we are reminded of the life-giving power of water when it is combined with the Word of God. And we are

reminded of how God used this water to overwhelm and destroy Satan.

Christ's Baptism is a marvelous event, yet it is a little puzzling. I am currently teaching the 5th and 6th grade religion class at St. James and during the lesson on Jesus' Baptism the question was raised by one of the students: Why did Jesus Christ, the Son of God, someone who was totally innocent of all guilt, why did He need to be baptized by John? John even protests and says it should be the other way around.

Wasn't John's baptism a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? Jesus certainly had no need for forgiveness. He was blameless of any sin. He was totally innocent, sort of. Christ never personally sinned. He was blameless in that regard. But he was not innocent, because He was guilty of all our sin.

Martin Luther calls Christ's Baptism a beautiful, glorious exchange. Christ does the will of His Father in Heaven. He took upon Himself all the sins of the world, none of which He had committed, and He wiped them away from our lives. In His Baptism, Christ accepted His role as scapegoat for all of mankind.

He was now going to be the one blamed for every sin ever committed. He was the one who was going to be held accountable. And He was the one who was going to have to pay for our transgressions.

Our sins were paid for with Christ's blood on the cross, and now He has clothed us in His righteousness – placing His perfect righteousness and holiness upon us. That is what happened through Baptism. His

righteousness was placed on us, and our sin was placed on Him. Truly, a beautiful, glorious exchange.

He “became sin for us,” as St. Paul says. At His Baptism, He exchanged His perfect righteousness for our suffering, pain, and death. In Christ’s Baptism, in this epiphany event, Jesus Christ’s true nature is revealed. He is the Son of God, and He is the Savior of the world. As soon as John baptizes Jesus, God the Father speaks from heaven and says, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” Christ is revealed to the world as the Son of God.

The Father in Heaven is not “well pleased” just because Jesus gave us the example of Baptism, as if all that were going on here was that Jesus was making a symbolic gesture for the sake of His disciples. In Christ’s Baptism, Jesus did set the example for us to follow; that we are to go and do likewise. However, that is not the most important aspect of this event.

The Father in Heaven is “well pleased” because the Son whom He loves has willingly accepted the humiliating, painful task set before Him. The Father in Heaven is “well pleased” because the Son whom He loves has changed places with His sinful children whom He loves – so that the sin is no longer on us, but rests solely upon the shoulders of the Son of God.

Jesus Christ is the beloved Son of our Father in Heaven. But God also loves His children whom He had created in His own image, but who had fallen away to Satan’s temptation. And the only way that He could get us back was to offer His own Son as a sacrifice.

On the day of His Baptism, Jesus willingly traded places with you and me. He put our sin and guilt on Himself, and He placed His righteousness on us, so that now we are blameless in God's eyes.

The forgiveness of sins is real. Whatever guilt you think you still carry has been taken off of you because you live under the grace of your Baptism, and it was actually placed upon the Son of God Himself on that day when John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River.

Those sins are now paid for, and we are free from our guilt. Our salvation is complete in Christ. There is nothing that we can do to make ourselves more forgiven. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, He walked away from His Baptism carrying your sin and the sins of the whole world.

Jesus said to John, "it is fitting for us [to do this] to fulfill all righteousness." On the day that Christ was baptized, Jesus began His public ministry. When this occurred, God's plan for salvation was set in motion, and there was nothing that could prevent God from fulfilling His promise to redeem His people.

We, as the people of God, now gather together to give thanks to our Father for loving us so much that He would sacrifice His Son to wash us clean of our sin and guilt. Thanks be to God for this beautiful, glorious exchange. Amen.