**Luke 3:15-22**

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, **16**  John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. **17** His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” **18** So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. **19** But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, **20** added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison. **21** Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, **22** and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

**“Baptism At Work For You”**

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Identity is a necessary thing for us in life. It happens right at birth when parents need to decide a name for their child. Identity does not stop with just a name. How many various forms of I.D. do we need to carry around now days? The most familiar are a driver’s license and social security number. Of course, that only scratches the surface. In order to travel abroad, you are going to need a passport. If you want to conceal and carry a gun, be ready to have a background check and time in class. Some know they are unable to go to work unless they wear their company badge. Even death requires proof that the person deceased is really that person.

The season of Epiphany began last Wednesday. It falls on January 6th starting out with the story of the wisemen. They follow a star seeking at last to identify Him who was born king of the Jews. A good way to summarize this season is to say, “At Christmas, God appears as man, and at Epiphany, this man appears before the world as God. That Christ became man needed no proof. But that this man, this helpless child, is God needed proof” (Treasury of Daily Prayer 1094). Epiphany starts with the star pointing to Bethlehem. However, this first Sunday always brings the greater and public proof about Jesus. His baptism by John reveals that He is the Christ, true God and true man, upon whom the Holy Spirit rests and in whom the Father delights. Jesus’ baptism is a great epiphany for us as the baptized and any to identify our whole life in Him.

John came preaching about life. It was with those sharp words, “Repent and be baptized.” This is what we always hear as a theme during Advent. Now a shift takes place in Epiphany. All the people baptized are to see the One baptized for all people. It is about move from the water of John to the Word become flesh. As we say about the benefits of baptism from the Small Catechism. It is, “…not just water, but the word of God in and with the water does these things along with the faith that trusts this word of God in the water.” In other words, Jesus is that Word in the water who does great things for us. This is why three significant events happen after His baptism. This is how we are to identify our whole life in Christ.

First, a paradise lost is now to look to heaven opened by Jesus. The truth we must identify how life has fallen into the darkness of sin. Genesis makes it clear, “God drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life” (3:24). There is no way to go back to what was lost, but man naturally keeps trying. Regrettably, the outcome of building paradise by our hands has not been so pleasant. Plenty throughout time have offered paradise at a price, but it was too costly with murder, suppression, and great evil. Yet, even the softer ways of paradise whether praised on TV, sold in prime real estate, or whatever glory in this life still falls short.

This is why heaven alone opened to Jesus. His praying after baptism shows the perfect man who is God. He opens paradise prepared not by means of stained hands of a sinner, but as Him who is sinless. It is through the flesh of Christ that heaven has now opened to all humanity forever. Baptism is the place where Jesus accepts the role of being the sacrifice. Since He opens heaven, His body offered up on the cross is a true appeal for our sake. As He told His disciples, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:3). Baptism has now made that claim of heaven opened to us. Paradise not achieved or earned by sinners. It is forgiveness received by what Jesus works for all.

Second, a world of grief is now to regard the Spirit of a new creation. Again, like paradise lost, our world has felt a watery grave long ago. Noah knew that death was far from a natural progression of life. Death was a curse of sin and ultimately a judgment. This came once in the most evident way by the Flood. The Lord told Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence...” (Genesis 6:13). Of course, there was sadness in the flood for it was the sign of an end. Yet, Noah and His family received new life after the waters receded. Tragedies, disease, war, starvation still flood our lives with grief. This old creation is passing away and the Law remains relentless toward life.

This is why the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form, like a dove, on Jesus. As the dove was a sign of newness after the flood, so after His baptism the dove reveals the new creation. Jesus anointed by the Spirit is the Christ. At His baptism, He does not receive a washing away of sin, but takes upon Himself the judgment of death for all. Jesus bears this grief throughout His ministry and lets judgment takes its course. There at the cross a flood of suffering and death consumed His life. Loss is no different for Christians than anybody else. However, the difference is that we already get death over with by baptism. We died with Christ by water having received newness the world cannot give. Baptism works daily to have us die to self and rise to Christ. The Spirit even preserves us for, “Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”

Third and greatest of all, the accusing Devil now must surrender to what the Father speaks. Our worst enemy is not someone stopped by earthly weapons or the strength of man. He continues to speak lies against the truth. He keeps at his work tempting and twisting one generation to the next. He delights over straying sheep of God when they get eaten by his wolves. Sinners remain captive to his kingdom ruled by selfishness, pleasure, and glory. Otherwise, if he cannot keep you captive, then the Devil prods and pokes to tear down the strongest saints. He is a master at monopolizing on guilt and shame to cut off any from God. It is to cause every doubt and despair over God’s love and goodness. The Devil even uses the voices throughout the world to distract and pushout whatever salvation God speaks.

This is why the voice that came from heaven spoke the best to Jesus. The Father said, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” If there was ever a monopoly, we find it at Jesus’ baptism with Trinity in fullness as the saving God. No intruding words by the devil only grace and mercy for sinners. What the Father says is approval over who Jesus is and all that He will do for mankind. Baptism now identifies and connects us to Christ. It comes with the same love of the Father for us. He is well-pleased regardless the condition of your life. God has promised by baptism, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” The devil seeks to have a voice, but God now speaks by His Holy Word and Sacrament. Whatever accusation, Jesus lets us hear forgiveness. Whatever the captivity, Jesus breaks the bonds by His love. Whatever the despair, Jesus remains faithful to doubting hearts.

More than identity needed for life, Jesus’ baptism is a great epiphany. God identifies with us so our whole life now identifies with Him. Amen. Now the peace of God be with your heart and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.