**Matthew 3:13-17 January 8, 2023**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from Matthew chapter 3 here re-reading these words. “And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

On this day in the Church year; when we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, we also take an opportunity to look back upon our own baptisms. It’s a chance for us to meditate and look at what exactly Baptism is, and why it is so important. And it’s importance lies in the fact that Baptism tells us who we really are, why Jesus came, and how much God truly loves us.

When we sing the New Testament Canticle in the Service of Prayer and Preaching we sing these words. “Count Yourselves as Dead to Sin and Alive to God.” Those words are quoted from Paul’s letter to the Romans, in chapter 6 and this section is our Epistle lesson for this morning. Paul writes “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus”. Death and life. That’s Baptism. It is being put to death and being raised back to life all in one moment. Death and life, that is what Jesus life was really all about. Earlier in this post-Christmas season, in the Sundays immediately after Christmas, and as we looked at Epiphany last week, we saw King Herod seeking to kill Jesus and how Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled into Egypt. We saw that Jesus was dodging destruction in the earliest years of his life. Herod sought His death, but he lived, and He grew, and he learned, and he experienced the same things that we do in our lives. The Son of God, became human! He ate, drank, slept, cried, laughed, and experienced pain. Christmas is over, the baby born in Bethlehem, and the child visited by the magi has grown up. And now, Jesus comes to John the Baptist, and he faces resistance. This is the start of His earthly ministry. But there is one hang up; John does not see himself as worthy enough to baptize Jesus.

And is he wrong? After all, John has a legitimate claim for not wanting to baptize the Son of God. To understand John’s motives we have to understand what baptism is. And it’s been called many things, and is certainly misunderstood by other religions and our society today who see baptism in contrary ways to how the Bible speaks about it. Yet, it is the Bible that clearly states that Baptism is necessary for salvation, as Jesus himself says, “Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved.” We know that with water comes a cleansing, and a healing of dirt and wretchedness, and the book of Titus gives us a clear definition by speaking of Baptism as a washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Baptism, is the moment when God washes us clean of our sin, and when we are born again a new creation clothed in Christ’s perfect righteousness.

So why did Jesus need to be baptized? If Christ was perfect as the Scriptures say, why would this perfect Son of God, need to be washed clean of His Sin? That’s really what’s behind John’s rebuke of Jesus’ request, and Christ gives an answer that sets the tone for His entire Earthly Ministry. These are Jesus’ first words, in the entire Gospel of Matthew. He says “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” The fulfillment of righteousness, that is why Jesus was baptized. That is why Jesus took on human flesh in the first place. That is why He was standing before John, it is why He stood before the Pharisees and Scribes, and why he eventually stood before Pontius Pilate. He submitted himself to a life of submission to the Law, and even being Baptized, not because He himself needs it, but in order to be our substitute. He did it in order to stand in the place of us sinners, and give to us His perfection.

Because in Baptism is perfection and life, God giving to sinful man his gifts and his righteousness. But in order to do that, there has to be death as well. Death and life are what this Sacrament is all about, and we are the definition of death. We are the poster children of death. Remember the words of Paul? What we sing in the Canticle? It’s a happy and joyous Canticle where we sing “Christ has been raised from the dead! Alleluia!” and it’s a very upbeat song that we sing in the Church right before the end of the service, but the words are actually very heavy. “Count yourselves as Dead to Sin and alive to God.” You also must consider yourselves **DEAD** to sin. And that’s what we are. Dead. Without Jesus Christ, we are dead. Because sin brings death, sin is death. Remember the words in the Garden of Eden that God gave to Adam and Eve, He said very clearly and plainly, that if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that they will die. And so, because we are in the perfect image of God, we have a heart of sin, a heart of death, an evil twisted heart that yearns for our own sinful desires each and every single second of each and every single day. We are not simply a sick patient that needs to be treated. We’re not a work in progress. We aren’t a house that has a few problems with it, but that can be refurbished and remodeled. When it comes to sin we are dead,. We are not able to save ourselves, we are not able to give ourselves life. We are not just sick with a few symptoms that inconvenience us, we are terminally ill. We are not a house with a few problems that can be fixed up, we are a condemned building with a rotting and crumbling foundation that needs to be bulldozed to the ground. We, who are dead to sin, need life.

And think for a moment about Jesus’ baptism. Think about what your own baptism was really all about. Often when thinking of Jesus’ baptism we think that He was bathed in nice, clear, warm and welcoming water like we use here in God’s house when we have a Baptism, but the truth is, He was baptized in a stinking, disgusting, public river. He was brought down into this muck that swallowed him up, and then, as it says, immediately, Christ comes up from the water. And in a sign of God’s might and power, the heavens were opened to him, but this word in the Greek really refers more to a ripping apart. The heavens were ripped asunder, the separation between God and man was gone in this instant. It reminds us of when Jesus gives up His spirit on the cross and the veil in the temple is ripped in two. The separation is gone, the separation of sin is destroyed. The sight must have been magnificent, as Jesus comes up from the water and from this tearing apart of the heavens comes the glory and person of the Holy Spirit descending like a dove to rest upon the King of Kings.

God himself comes and dwells with the one who was dead, giving them life. That’s Baptism. It is when sin gets drowned and dies in the waters of God’s Holiness. It is, as Paul states, when we are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ. Baptism is death and life. And in Baptism God shows us His love, and He gives us life.

And this is not a limited amount of life, like the life we know here on Earth. This is life everlasting, a life that flows and grows throughout our lives because it is the faith that is created in our hearts. We who were dead to sin are now alive in Christ, and the life I’m speaking about please do not misunderstand. I’m not talking about an emotional or enthusiastic feeling of life, almost like a spiritual high point in our lives. I’m not saying that now, this morning, because of God’s grace and His providing of His Word, and the forgiveness of our Sins, and the Sacraments that you will be guaranteed to always feel as if you’re up in the clouds, happy and energetic for the rest of today, and the next day and the next day throughout the week. When Paul says “alive to God” he is speaking about the life that is ours through us sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, meaning that we now have eternal life, through the gift of faith. And while this is true and reinforced here in God’s House, it is not dependent on our mood or anything that we do. Baptism brings the certainty of our salvation because it is what God has done for us, not what we do for God. We now do not need to fear death, because we have been washed clean of our sin. We do not need to feel the need to fight the fight of sin on our own and attempt to overwhelm and defeat our sinful heart, because it has been created into a new heart and a new creation by His Word and His actions alone. We who were dead, are now alive through His grace, mercy, and most importantly, His love.

Yet it is said that this sinful heart of ours, this sinful nature, this desire for nothing but evil is a good swimmer. And Luther reminds us that this sinful nature or as He calls it, the Old Adam in us, should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die. Meaning that the astounding love of God, shown to us in our baptisms, should be our strength throughout our lives, as we struggle as both saint and sinner. That while we have been assured of life everlasting in heaven, here on Earth we still sin, and give in to the temptations to go back to our lives of sin. But by daily contrition and repentance, our Old Adam, our sinful nature is drowned again in the waters of Baptism, and we are reminded of the life that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Life and death, that is what Jesus ministry was all about, and it really defines our lives as well. We come into this world with a death sentence, a heart of sin, and unable to save ourselves from it. But here, at the fount of Baptism, we are given life. Life through the work of one person, Jesus Christ. We have life, because of Christ’s death on the cross, where he took upon himself our sins and saved us from death forever. God be with you throughout your lives, and be assured of the life that is to come, because we are Dead to Sin and Alive to God, only in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.