

To Fulfill All Righteousness...

SERMON TEXT: Matthew 3:13-17

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Dearly beloved of God, the heirs of God's promise, our sermon's text is taken from this morning's Gospel lesson. Let us pray...

*O Father, whose voice spoke from the heavens, and whose Spirit anointed our Saviour, Your beloved Son, we come before you in His name united to Him through our baptism so as to hear of His own baptism to fulfill all righteousness. Touch my lips, O Lord, my God, that I might speak of the wonders of Your love, expressed toward us all, in the sending of Your Son. By Your indwelling Spirit, with whom we have been sealed unto salvation, prepare our hearts and minds to hear anew Your Word of promise to us in Christ Jesus. **Amen.***

Fourteen days, a mere two weeks, have now passed since we joyously gathered together to commemorate the birth of our Lord in Bethlehem and this morning in which we congregate to observe His baptism by the banks of the Jordan, at the hand of John the Baptist. Through this morning's text we've moved from the Christ child in the manger to the Messiah as a man who appears before John in order to be baptized so as to begin the mission that will take Him from Galilee to Golgotha. Guided by the Church's calendar, we, as the Church, are now moving ever closer toward Easter as Christmas' cradle points us to the manifestation of His mission: Calvary's cross. With today's text we've jumped forward thirty years from the time that the angelic host sang its praises to God for His gracious gift of peace and goodwill in the giving of His Son. We take this leap forward for it is *here*, in His Son's baptism, that the first steps to fulfill all righteousness are to be found. It is here where the promised child, Jesus, whose name

literally means “the LORD’s salvation”, inaugurates His holy mission, as God’s Messiah, to save us all. So, let’s journey together back to the banks of the Jordan, down to the riverside, through the wilderness, by means of this morning’s Gospel lesson.

Our text for today begins by telling us of Jesus’ own journey, in which He travelled approximately two dozen kilometres on foot, to come before His cousin, John, so as to be baptized. John stands at the foot of the river that the Israelites had crossed a long, long time before, when they had entered the Promised Land after being led out of the desert by Joshua (whose name is just another version of the name “Jesus”). John’s ministry by the riverbank consists of a call to God’s covenant people to “repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” John calls his countrymen to come and be baptized so as to have their consciences cleansed as they confess their sins in preparation for the coming reign of God through the One who is to come after John—the One who will, on the day of judgement, baptize by fire and the Holy Spirit! John’s prophetic cry in the wilderness calls the nation, and all in her midst, to flee the coming of God’s wrath. John, you see, stands at the site where they first entered the land as God’s chosen nation. He cries out that they need to go through the waters anew to be converted once more to the faith of their fathers by repenting of their sins against God, the Father of all. Now, it is in *this* context that John’s cousin, Jesus, after crossing the desert’s wilderness, comes to the river to be baptized in its water.

“I need to be baptized by You, and do *You* come to *me*?” asks John with utter incredulity. Given the context, John is rightly taken aback by Jesus’ presence before him, and in response attempts to prevent Jesus from being baptized. John, understandably,

can't quite comprehend the situation at hand. After all, John had been preparing the way for the One who would baptize by fire and with the Holy Spirit in accord with God's just judgement. He also rightly recognized that Jesus was, in fact, the One whose way he was preparing. Furthermore, the people who went out into the wilderness at the heeding of his call to repentance had come confessing their sins and seeking cleansing. So, why was Jesus—the very One who John spoke of as being mightier than he, the straps of whose sandals John, by his own admission, wasn't worthy to loose— appearing before him in this manner? Did Jesus, the One born of a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit, need to repent of sin?!?! No, for He was without sin; however, He would soon become, in a certain sense, the world's greatest sinner for our sake. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther taught, in accord with the writings of the prophets, that, "Christ should become the greatest transgressor, murderer, adulterer, thief, rebel, and blasphemer, there ever was or could be in the world." In the words of God's Word it is stated in this way, "[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." This is what Jesus' baptism was to be about. Did you hear that last part about our becoming "the righteousness of God in Him"? Do you recall Jesus' response to John? Jesus said, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us *to fulfill all righteousness.*"

John, serving as the voice of the prophets of the Old Testament, was preparing the way for the fulfillment of God's promise to act on their behalf and save them through a new and better covenant. God took action by sending His Son to work in the world He so loves by being numbered among sinners in a shockingly surprising way: the sinless Son of God would, in His baptism, become uniquely united to sinners. His baptism would

begin the work of making sinners right with God as He prepared to take their place. This is the “righteousness” of God’s plan of salvation through Jesus, the One who was given the name meaning “the LORD’s salvation”, because it is Jesus who would ultimately bear the sins of all people upon Himself. This act of taking our place began in the place where many came seeking the coming kingdom of heaven. They came in response to John’s call to repentance; Jesus came in answer to their cries for forgiveness. Jesus, in His baptism, ushered in the reign of God by humbly identifying Himself with the heritage of God’s people, Israel. By becoming a man, Jesus became the “second Adam”; by being baptized, Jesus, in a similar sense, became Israel for the salvation of all Israel.

Now, I must admit, this may seem confusing at first. However, such language which speaks of the many as being represented by one person shouldn’t surprise us (even if it may confuse us). For example, in the Book of Exodus, the LORD referred to the descendants of Jacob, those who were suffering in bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt, by using the collective name of Israel to represent them all. So, clearly, God isn’t talking about Jacob, the son of Isaac, whom He renamed Israel, but rather He is speaking about those who came from Jacob’s lineage, the entire nation, as being Israel. The LORD, through Moses, warned Pharaoh to release this vast multitude of people because, as it is written, “Israel is My son, My firstborn.” Clearly God is speaking of the many as if they were one because, in reference to the Exodus, the prophet Hosea records the words of the LORD as follows: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” Now, Jesus, by being baptized in the Jordan by John, is, in fact, fulfilling “all righteousness” by placing Himself in the people’s presence so as to identify Himself with

them, stand in their stead, and thereby save them all. He becomes, in a sense, their representative— all of Israel reduced into one person! Jesus, the Only-Begotten Son of God, the actual heir of all creation, the Son of Man, has come to assume the role of the servant that Isaiah spoke of when he prophesied about the One who would bear the iniquity of His people's sins upon Himself. For, in His own words, Jesus came, "not to be served but *to serve*, and to give his life *as a ransom for many*." Did you catch that? Jesus is *one* man come to take the place of *many*. By His baptism, Jesus, God's eternal Son enfleshed, becomes "Israel", God's "son", and identifies with sinners so as to bring about the *greatest* exodus: freedom from the bondage to sin!

Upon Jesus' rising forth from the waters, St. Matthew, St. Mark, and St. Luke record that the very heavens were rent asunder and that the voice of God declared, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." We are also told of the Holy Spirit's descending and resting upon our Lord in the form of a dove. Here we hear of Christ's prophetic anointing as both king and high-priest over the people. Jesus, the Son of David, like David before Samuel, at the very same age, the age of thirty, is anointed by the very same Spirit. This should serve to drive the point home that Jesus is indeed the promised "King of the Jews" that the Magi sought shortly after His birth. That Jesus is the Messiah, the Davidic King whose kingdom will have no end and who will draw to Himself all the peoples of all the nations, is also brought forth in the words of the Father from heaven as they bring to mind the words found in the second psalm of David: "You are my Son; today I have begotten you." Now, of course, Jesus *is* God's Son from *both* eternity *and* from His birth in time; however, this use of "son" in reference to God is

actually a messianic term. The presence of the Holy Spirit in such a manner points to Jesus' messianic mission to represent all of Israel, God's "son", as their rightful king who reigns in righteousness. God's pleasure in this is made known as Jesus' anointing also points us to His role as high-priest *and* sacrifice. He who was anointed by the Holy Spirit went down into the river's water so as to save us from eternally drowning in a lake of fire. This is God's righteousness, His work of salvation, the reign of His kingdom drawing near by bringing heaven to earth through His Christ.

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, the anointed son of God's promises to mankind, became a man so that men could be counted as being sons. In *His* baptism He identified Himself with the heritage of Israel; in *our* baptism, being baptized in His holy name, we identify with Him by being united to His death and resurrection, being cleansed from our sins, and becoming God's children— children to whom God has said, "You are mine!" For, as it is written:

Thus says the Lord,
 he who created you, O Jacob,
 he who formed you, O Israel:
 "Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by name, you are mine.
 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
 and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
 when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
 and the flame shall not consume you.
 For I am the Lord your God,
 the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

St. Mark's, St. Matthew's, and St. Luke's texts tell us of Jesus' baptism so as to prepare us in our understanding of His journey from the Jordan to Jerusalem in the pursuit of our justification. In our own baptism, by being united to Christ, we find the fulfillment of "all righteousness" and receive God's own Spirit as a seal of His promise to us. John the Baptist pointed to Jesus as the One who would come so that in turning to Him, the very Lamb of God, in penitent faith, all could know of God's righteousness. Jesus is the reign and righteousness of God fulfilled! Let us then recall our own baptism this day as we hear of His and let us rejoice in all that the LORD has done in sending us His Son. In those times when the weight of our sin seems great, let us turn our eyes to the Saviour who is far greater than all of our sins. When Satan dredges up your past, look to the day when your sins were drowned in the waters of your baptism into Christ, and then remind Satan of his future in the lake of fire. His fate is not ours because we were united in our baptism to Him who stood together with us in His baptism so as to fulfill all righteousness. Yes, dear brethren, we stand with Him and by Him who stood in our place and stands with us forevermore. In this faithful work of the Son, for our sake, the Father, now our Father in Christ, is well pleased. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.