

JESUS WAS BAPTIZED...AND THE HEAVENS WERE OPENED
Matthew 3:13-17; Epiphany 1 Historic; January 9-10, 2021

[GREETING]

Why do we open doors? Basically, there are two reasons: to go out or to come in.

When Jesus was baptized by John, Matthew tells us that Jesus **“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; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”** Heaven was opened at Jesus’ Baptism and the Holy Spirit descended and remained on Him.

In other words, Baptism opens heaven and gives the Holy Spirit. This was true for Jesus at His Baptism, but it is also true for us when we are baptized. When we are baptized heaven is opened and we receive the Holy Spirit. And heaven is not just opened to pour out the Holy Spirit on us but also opened to us so we can go to heaven to be with God forever. The Holy Spirit comes out of heaven so we can go back in with Him, which is what God wants for us.

This addresses a problem that all of us have: sin and unrighteousness. Nothing sinful and unclean can enter into heaven to stand before God and live. Our sin condemns us to death and destines us for hell, not heaven. Sin and unbelief close heaven to us and there is nothing we can do to unlock and open heaven’s door to enter in. What we cannot do for ourselves God does for us in Jesus Christ. Jesus comes to wash away our sins and make us righteous before God. He does this through His Baptism in the Jordan River and by joining our baptisms with His.

We hear this described in Luther’s “Flood Prayer” when we pray for those about to be baptized. “Through the Baptism in the Jordan of Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, You sanctified and instituted all waters to be a blessed flood and a lavish washing away of sin” (*LSB* 269). What is it about Jesus’ Baptism that by it, when we are baptized, we are sanctified and heaven is open to us?

This was really John the Baptist's question when Jesus presented Himself to him to be baptized. **John would have prevented Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?"** When John recognized Jesus as God's Christ, the Messiah, he realized that he was standing before the Holy One, the One without sin, the Righteous One. John knew that he was a sinner needing to be forgiven. So he said to Jesus, **"I need to be baptized by You!"** It did not seem right to John, who had baptizing sinners, that he should baptize Jesus. It should be the other way around; Jesus should be baptizing him, John. But John was wrong about this. Heaven would remain closed without Jesus being baptized.

Jesus' response to John explains why. **"Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."** By being baptized, Jesus, the Righteous One, would make all unrighteous people righteous before God and fit for heaven. This shows that Jesus' Baptism is connected to His suffering and death on the cross, and then His resurrection and ascension into heaven. Jesus was beginning in the Jordan His work of justifying sinners, but it would not be completed and fulfilled until He died on the cross with the sins of the whole world.

How are Jesus' Baptism and death related to our sin and death? At Jesus' Baptism He identified Himself with us sinners and joined Himself to us and our sin. Another way of putting this is to say that Jesus received our sins when He was baptized so He could die with our sins on the cross. Jesus, the Righteous One, became unrighteous with our sins. Jesus, the Innocent One, was declared guilty of our sins by God and condemned to die for the sins of the world, which He had accepted as His own sin at His Baptism.

The One at whose Baptism heaven was opened, the Holy Spirit descended and came to rest on, and of whom God the Father declared, **"This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,"** was the same One who was mocked while hanging on the cross: **"He trusts in God; let God deliver Him now, if He desires Him. For He said, 'I am the Son of God'"** (27:43). God the Father was well pleased that His Son suffer on the cross for us and our salvation. And when it came time for Jesus to die, **He cried out with a loud voice and gave up His Spirit** (27:50), the Spirit He received at His Baptism.

Baptism is not a quaint ceremony. Consider how we treat its water. We use clean water in the font for every Baptism, but it always becomes contaminated. It is polluted with our sins that were washed from us by that water and God's Word. And there is always blood in that water, **the blood of Jesus God's Son that cleanses us from all sin** (1 Jn 1:7). We are reminded of this by the words used in the Rite of Holy Baptism, "Receive the sign of the holy cross both upon your ✠ forehead and upon your ✠ heart to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified" (*LSB* 268). We are washed clean and our sins are forgiven by Jesus. After the Baptism is over, the water that started out clean but is now filthy with our sin is poured, usually through a special drain, into the ground to show that we with our sins have been buried with Christ, who is now risen from the dead.

When we are baptized our righteousness in Christ is fulfilled, the Holy Spirit comes to rest on us, and we are declared, with Jesus, to be the beloved children of God.

Another way of saying that "our righteousness in Christ is fulfilled" is to say we are "justified by grace." Since Jesus Christ became unrighteous with our sins at His Baptism and died on the cross to pay the full price for our sins, when we are baptized, God the Father declares us righteous with the righteousness of His own Son, that is, we are justified. Since the blood of Jesus God's Son cleanses us of all sin, we are also sanctified, made holy with God's own holiness.

Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. In Baptism, the Holy Spirit comes from heaven to rest on us, creating in us the faith that trusts the work of Jesus to save us, that His righteousness has been credited to us through faith in Jesus. With our sins washed away we can stand before God with the holiness of God Himself.

Many people have a hard time believing that the sprinkling of a little water with a few words can do such great things, but it does, as Luther reminds us in the *Small Catechism* where he quotes the words of Titus three: **"He [God] 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 that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying"** (3:5–8 NIV, alt.). Believe it; it's true.

St. Paul also wrote in Romans four: **Righteousness... will be counted to us who believe in Him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification** (4:24-25). From this we see that Baptism is not just about the death of Jesus but also His resurrection from the dead, and our resurrection from the dead.

Just like God the Father did not abandon His Son to the grave after dying on the cross but raised Him on the third day, our heavenly Father will not abandon us His children to the grave but will raise us from the dead on the Last Day. Just like Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven in His glorious body, God will raise us from the dead with glorious bodies like that of Jesus and we will ascend to heaven in those bodies to live forever.

As we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord, we rejoice that His Baptism fulfilled righteousness for us and that Jesus shares His righteousness with us in our Baptisms. And the same Holy Spirit that rested on Him rests on us so we can believe and trust in this righteousness of God. At our baptisms, we hear what God said of Jesus, **“This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,”** as what He also says to us. We are the beloved children of God, and He is pleased to open heaven to us for the sake of His Son. In the name of Jesus, Amen.