

January 7, 2024

The Baptism of Our Lord

Text: Joshua 3:1-17; Matthew 3:13-17

Writing to the Church in Rome, St. Paul speaks of the Scriptures and says, “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” In God’s Word, we are given examples, teachings, that repeat or build on previous things, and from the repetition the Lord drives home a point.

We see that in today’s readings, where the people crossing into the Promised Land at the Jordan River is built upon in the account of Our Lord’s Baptism, also in the Jordan River. As we take these and then apply them to our own lives as Christians, we see our Baptisms, where we pass through water into the Kingdom of God.

In each instance, we see three things: first, God working, both miraculously but also through human means, second, God bringing His people to the place He has made for them, and third, conflict awaiting God’s people, but God granting the victory to those He has brought through.

We’ll start off with our Old Testament reading, from Joshua 3, and that first element of the account we’re looking for – God working miraculously through human means. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel are at last brought by God to the Promised Land.

But in their way lies the Jordan River. To be sure, it’s no Nile, no Euphrates. But it’s still a river, and river overflowing its banks at flood stage. Maybe healthy young spies traveling light could swim or wade across it.

But you’ve got an entire nation that needs to cross – little children, the elderly, wagons, flocks, herds. What are they going to do? Or, looking back at their own history, what is God going to do?

The Lord tells Joshua that, as He was with Moses, He will be with Joshua as well. And so, He will do for Joshua what He did for His servant Moses. The previous generation had witnessed the Lord parting the Red Sea; this generation will likewise see the awesome power of God. By His divine might, God causes the waters of the Jordan River to be halted far upriver, rising into a great heap.

The Israelites, and all the Canaanites who happened to be nearby, would see that this God had power far beyond the idols and false gods of the peoples. Only the Lord could do such a great and powerful work, bringing His people across on dry ground, just as He had done for their fathers coming out of Egypt.

Now undoubtedly, the Lord could have accomplished this miraculous work in any number of ways. Yet here He chooses to act through men. He tells Joshua, “And when the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap.” The Lord’s mighty act shall be brought about when His priests move forward into the river carrying His ark. When their feet touch the river, it will be stopped.

Now this power obviously isn't coming from the priests themselves. They have nothing in themselves to cause a flooding river to be dried up. But God has chosen to act through them. They will stand, holding the ark, in the middle of the riverbed as the whole nation crosses over.

They aren't the ones holding back the tons and tons of water, but the Lord causes them to be there, so that their presence, holding His ark, is something the Israelites can see, and trust in, as they walk across. We see God working miraculously, and yet through human means.

Fast forward roughly fourteen hundred years, and we God work in this way again, as another great entrance takes place in the Jordan. Jesus, now grown up, heads to the Jordan to begin His public ministry. His journey isn't geographical, needing to get from one side of the river to the other.

No, for Jesus, this is a much greater transition. This event at the Jordan marks the moment when Jesus no longer just lives as a carpenter's son, and likely a carpenter himself, in Nazareth, but sets out to accomplish that which God had promised so long ago. He will be moving forward to bring in the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of the Heavens. His journey is that of bringing heaven to earth, the reign of God to those lost in darkness.

Such great things could never be brought about by the power of men. No, only God could do this. Only God could come as the One who would defeat sin and death, who would crush the serpent's head and restore humanity to Himself.

However, this event is marked by God working through a man, as He had through those priests carrying His ark. The Son of God in human flesh comes to the son of a human priest, John the Baptist, and asks to be baptized in the Jordan by him. This seems backward to John, who understands just who it is who asks this. You can understand his words to Jesus: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

But Baptism isn't something one does to oneself; it always comes from another. And in this instance, God desires it to come through John. Jesus tells him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." This is His divine plan.

And in this, Jesus shows His perfect humility and obedience to His Father's will, humbling Himself to be baptized in these same waters which have washed over tax collectors, prostitutes, and all other manner of sinners.

God does show forth glory here, rending the heavens, sending the Holy Spirit as a dove, and booming forth His love and acceptance of His Son from heaven itself. But all this divine glory comes about when God chooses to work through a man.

Your entrance into God's Kingdom is also marked by the miraculous working of God, who chooses to work through human means. This takes place, not in the waters of the Jordan River, but in Holy Baptism, as Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

It is a true miracle that takes place at the font. There, you were given new and everlasting life. God the Holy Spirit came to dwell in you, just as He descended from heaven to rest upon Jesus at His

Baptism. You become a child of God, and heir of His eternal Kingdom. You are sealed by His sign, marked as His chosen. Satan and death must give you up, because God has claimed you as His own.

All of this is accomplished, incredibly enough, by God choosing to act through men. Our God uses ordinary people to be His instruments in bestowing His grace on those He brings in to His Kingdom.

There's no special power that those who baptize possess in themselves. People aren't saved from hell and given new life because the pastor is wearing robes or has a seminary degree. No, God's almighty power is what bestows the forgiveness won by Jesus upon the newly baptized.

Yet He uses the Sacrament of Baptism, a physical, historical event in someone's life, to give them reassurance and hope. Just as the Israelites marching across the Jordan could look over and see the priests standing there holding the ark and be reminded that their God was holding back the waters for them, you can remember your Baptism every time you make the sign of the cross, or by lighting your baptismal candle on the day you were baptized, or touching the font when you come up to the altar, and by all this be reminded that your God is holding back the devil and death itself for you.

God has worked miraculously in your Baptism, and He has done so through ordinary human means, just as He did with the Israelites, and with His own Son.

The second point seen in the readings is that these miraculous acts of God bring His people to where God has designed for them to be. In crossing over the Jordan, the people are brought into the Promised Land. This is, at last, a home for the children of Israel.

Since Abraham had left his father's house and begun traveling, he and his children had never had a place to call their own. They had traveled through the land, stopping periodically as their flocks and herds grazed there. But it was never their land. And then they went to Egypt and stayed there for four hundred years, first as honored guests of the Pharaoh and later as his slaves.

But even though whole generations were born and died there, Egypt was never home. The people were always looking to the day when God would bring them to the land promised to their fathers.

And now at last, they were entering it. Crossing the Jordan would bring them into the place where they could settle. There, they could shine God's light into the darkness of the nations around them. There, they could hear His words, sing His praises, and then share them with the Gentiles around them.

In the land, they could await the coming of the Messiah, who would gather not only them but all nations into the Kingdom of God. Being in the Promised Land let them have greater confidence and trust that the Lord would send the Promised One.

Centuries later, we see God again bringing His people, and in this case His own Son, into the place He established for Him. Jesus came to earth for a very specific purpose, to fulfill the promise He gave in the Garden.

He has been given the name Jesus by His heavenly Father because, as the angel told His adoptive father, He will save His people from their sins. He was born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, and is baptized in the Jordan all to bring about this salvation from God. This purpose, this life, is what He has come for.

Like the Old Testament Joshua, Jesus has come to bring His people into the land promised them by God. Beginning His ministry, Christ will proclaim, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” He will call people to leave behind their sinful works of darkness and come into the light of God.

Jesus will be the Good Shepherd, leading His people toward the green pastures of heaven, giving them to drink from the still waters that come from Him, the waters of life. He is the Promised One, and He is there to bring His people to the heavenly Promised Land of Zion, where they will dwell in peace with their God.

In your Baptism, you are brought into His Kingdom, His Promised Land. While those Israelites weren’t at their final destination, their home, the moment they crossed the Jordan, they were still in the Promised Land. Likewise, after your Baptism, you aren’t immediately taken to your heavenly home, but you are still in the Kingdom of God.

Even if it doesn’t seem like it at times, you are His child just as you will be in eternity. You may not see the white robe of Jesus’ righteousness that is spoken of in the Bible, but you have been given it all the same. Through His miraculous working in Holy Baptism, God has brought you to the place for which He created you.

The third common ground in today’s readings is that conflict would still lie ahead, but if the people remained faithful, God would grant them the victory.

Already, the Israelites had seen battles, and more battles would come. Joshua would lead the people against the seemingly impregnable walls of Jericho, and then in campaigns against all the pagan peoples of the land for his entire life. The Israelites would have enemies on every side, peoples who practiced abominations and worshiped demons who would fight tooth and nail against the Israelites and the true God.

And often, it would seem as though the Israelites were hopelessly outmatched. How is a nation of escaped slaves supposed to arm and equip thousands of men for battle? How can shepherds storm walled citadels? What good are spears and swords against iron chariots? Not to mention, the armies of Israel would often be outnumbered in these battles.

But as the Lord had promised, He would be with His people and would drive out their enemies from before them. Many years after the crossing of the Jordan, Joshua would remind the people in his farewell address, “One man of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the Lord your God who fights for you, just as He promised you.”

When the people remained faithful to God, no one could resist them. Iron chariots, giants, towering walls, none could stand before the might of the God of Israel. The Lord had promised to give

the people the land, and He kept His promise, granting victory after victory to Israel. Only when the people proved unfaithful would the Lord give the upper hand to their enemies. Yet when they repented and trusted in Him, the Lord gave them victory and security in the land He had sworn to them.

The third point holds true for Jesus as it did for the people of old. His path, begun at the Jordan, will be full of conflict, but by His faithfulness, He will be granted the victory by His Father.

Right after being baptized, the conflicts begin in earnest for Jesus, with the Holy Spirit sending Him out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. There, tired and hungry, the Lord will be offered everything from simple bread to the kingdoms of the earth and all their glory, if He will only bow down and worship the deceiver. For forty days this will go on until at last Satan departs and angels come to minister to Christ.

But Satan doesn't leave for good. As Jesus walks the earth, He will constantly be tempted – tempted to glorify Himself like Solomon; tempted to give into anger at these unbelieving people like Moses; tempted to let these sinners get what they deserve like Jonah. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus was tempted in every way imaginable, tempted just as we are.

And at the end of His ministry, the conflict becomes greatest, as He endures unimaginable suffering on the cross, mocked by those He is saving, abandoned by those who followed Him, forsaken by His Father who sent Him.

But through it all, Jesus remains perfectly faithful. He is tempted over and over, and yet never gives in, remaining pure and spotless. He satisfies the requirements of the Law perfectly, being holy as God is holy. He sets aside His will and follows His Father's will, taking the cup that only He could drink.

And on the third day, His Father raised Him from the dead, glorifying His beloved Son. In faithfulness, Jesus won the great, eternal victory, breaking the powers of sin, death, and hell. He had come to save His people, and in love for them He let nothing stand in His way.

The Old Testament Joshua led the people to victory over Canaanites to grant them the Promised Land; Jesus leads His people to victory over the grave, granting the Promised Land of paradise to all who believe in Him.

As with the Israelites, and with Jesus, you will have conflict in this life, but Jesus has won the victory for you. The Israelites crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land and many years of battles and struggle. Jesus came up out of the Jordan and went into the wilderness to be tested by Satan. The moment you leave the font, a life of spiritual battle and temptation awaits you as well.

As the peoples of Canaan constantly pressured the Israelites to be like them, adopting their lifestyles and ways of worship, the unbelieving world constantly pressures you to compromise with its ways. As Satan tempted Jesus with everything from bread to glory, you will be tempted with all manner of things, from the seemingly insignificant to great and strong desires.

And the battles might let up at times, but they will never truly be finished in this life.

At these times, remember those words of Jesus: “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” You will have trials. But Jesus has already won the victory. He has already overcome the world and its wicked prince.

He has sent His Spirit into your heart to give you peace. He has given His Word to be a light to you on the path to heaven. He has cast down the old evil foe, and He will not let you be overcome by temptation or darkness.

The struggles may be hard, but He will always provide a way out and also strength to endure while you are in them. And when you close your eyes in death, your Lord will see to it that, when you open them again, you will get to see paradise, just as He promised to the repentant thief on the cross.

In His closing words to His people, in the book of Revelation, Jesus gives this promise: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Your Lord has brought you into His Promised Land, His Kingdom, and if you are faithful, He will ensure that you make it to your final home, the place He has prepared for you in His house, the New Jerusalem.

Because of what our God has done for us in Jesus, those words spoken from heaven at the Baptism of Our Lord are true for you as well. You are His beloved sons and daughters, and in your being joined to Jesus, He is well pleased.

In the name of Jesus, amen.