

Throughout the Gospels, there's this constant theme running: God comes to men, so that men might be brought to God. That might even be one way in which you could summarize the Gospels. God comes to men so that men might be brought to God. Seems pretty straightforward, right?

What isn't so straightforward, for us men, anyway, is the way in which God comes to us and then brings us to Him. Think about the Christmas story as one example. It starts off with God becoming a man. The Creator becomes created. The Lord Almighty becomes a helpless baby. Why? What could there possibly be that God couldn't do as God that He could do as man?

Well, He did this so that He could die. That's the reason for Christmas: so that the immortal God could die. Now why would God want to die? What good could that possibly bring? Well, as it turns out, it will bring life. God dies so that men might live.

Now thanks be to God that we have the entirety of the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit in our hearts to help us make sense of the whole thing, and it does make wonderful, glorious sense, but on the surface, especially for those witnessing the whole thing firsthand, it seemed almost crazy.

The ways in which God comes to men so that men might be brought to God are often beyond our understanding. And yet the goodness and hope and glory and wonder that is brought about through these workings of God are likewise beyond our understanding – in a good way.

As we consider the account of the Baptism of Our Lord, we see this theme demonstrated for us: God coming as man, man not understanding, man brought to God.

So this account begins with Jesus coming out of Galilee, from His hometown of Nazareth, to the Jordan River where His cousin John has been baptizing. Jesus isn't just stopping in to say hi; He's there to be baptized. By John.

Here we hit one of those parts of how God works that doesn't make sense to our human minds. As John says, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John's confusion is quite understandable.

After all, what is baptism? The word simply means "a washing." John is baptizing there in the Jordan for repentance. John is preaching the coming of the Messiah, the one who will baptize with the Spirit and with fire, the one whose ax is at the foot of the tree, ready to chop down any not bearing fruit, the one who restore Israel and bring about God's salvation.

And so, people are coming out to John, hearing his message, repenting of their sins and being baptized – washed – by him so that they might be prepared for the arrival of this Messiah.

So now here comes that Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the one so great that John isn't even worthy to undo His sandals... and He wants John to baptize Him. Isn't that backwards? Isn't the Holy Spirit and fire much greater than dirty river water? What does the messenger have to offer to the One who is the message?

It gets even more confusing when you consider the bigger picture. John's baptism is one of repentance. But Jesus, He's holy, perfect, completely without sin. What does He have to confess? What does He have that needs washed away by baptism?

And further, Jesus is God – the Almighty One. What does He need John and John’s baptism for? What could this mere man have to offer to Yahweh in the flesh? Again, God’s working doesn’t always make sense to us.

But there’s a reason for that. As St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, “God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”

What Jesus is doing here at the Jordan seems low and despised, yet He will use it to bring about His righteousness for all people. And He’ll do it all in a way that leaves no room for human boasting or works or anything like that.

So first, why does the sinless Son of God go to a baptism of repentance? Let’s look back into the Old Testament. Back when God gave Moses the Law, He established a day of atonement, when one goat would be offered as a sin offering, and the other would have all the people’s sin confessed onto it by the high priest and then be sent out into the wilderness.

Jesus is the Lamb of God, who will make atonement for the sin of the world. Now the Lamb of God comes, and since He is also the great high priest, He who has no sin confesses the sin of all the world onto Himself.

Just as the goat would be sent off into the wilderness, Jesus, after His baptism, will be led out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. And eventually, He who bears the sin of all the world will head to the cross and become the sacrifice for that sin, paying for it all with His precious blood.

Once we understand this, Jesus’ being baptized in a baptism of repentance is not longer crazy, but rather a fulfillment of an Old Testament picture and the moment at which our sins – yours, mine, everyone’s – was placed upon Him.

So there’s why the baptism. But the question still remains: why did Jesus need John? Since He’s the great high priest, and God in the flesh, couldn’t He have just baptized Himself?

Now, Jesus doesn’t explain the “how” in why the other person is necessary, but He does make it clear that this is how He has established Baptism. Baptism is not something done by the self, but always something that comes from another.

Listen carefully to His reply to John’s question: “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Now, according to Jesus’ words, who is fulfilling all righteousness? He doesn’t say “it is fitting for me to fulfill all righteousness.” He says “us,” referring to both Himself and John the Baptist.

This doesn’t mean, of course, that Jesus and John are both equal contributors toward righteousness. Righteousness is still, as the Scriptures make clear, the work of God alone. He alone is righteous and holy. Jesus, not John, will be the atoning sacrifice for the sin of all mankind. As our Epistle lesson states clearly, man has nothing to boast of before God as though he contributed to his own salvation in the slightest.

What this word of Jesus does show us, though, is that God chooses to work through men. While the Lord can and does work directly, more often He works through His people. He uses them – John the Baptist, His apostles, us Christians – to proclaim His Gospel to others. He gathers sinners together, washes

them in Holy Baptism, and gives them His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation, making them saints – His Church.

He ordains sinful yet forgiven men to be pastors, to preach and teach His Word publicly in the world. He uses sinful yet forgiven men and women in their everyday lives to tell the Good News to the neighbors and coworkers and family members, the Good News that Jesus has died not just for the sins of a few, but for the whole world.

The Lord of glory and might works through humble, simple things, like the waters of Holy Baptism and the bread and wine of Holy Communion, choosing what is foolish in the world's eyes to shame the wise, as St. Paul writes. He has John the Baptist, a mere man, baptize His only-begotten Son, so that you might have absolute confidence that the gifts He has poured out upon you through other mere men are in fact truly yours and truly from Him.

These gifts which He gives to you are shown in the Baptism of His Son, where Jesus, the new Adam, the new man, becomes a clear example of what will happen for all those who are made new in Him.

The first thing to note is that when Jesus comes up from the water, things happen. This might seem either painfully obvious or irrelevant, but the fact remains that when Jesus is baptized, stuff happens. It's no mere symbol to satisfy the onlooking crowds or questioning Pharisees. Jesus tells John that this will be a part of His fulfilling all righteousness, and those weren't empty words.

When you were baptized, according to the command of Christ Himself before He ascended into heaven, it was no empty action either. God promises all manner of blessings in Holy Baptism, and when you are baptized, they become reality.

What sort of blessings? Again, look to the example of our Lord's baptism. He comes out of the water and immediately the heavens are opened to Him. There is no delay. He doesn't have to go out and earn this, prove that His baptism was sincere or something before it happens. Immediately, heaven is opened to Him.

When you were baptized, immediately heaven was opened to you. Now, you couldn't visibly see it as Jesus did, but it was opened all the same. We all, like our first father Adam, were separated from the presence of God by our sin. After Adam and Eve rebelled, they were driven from the Garden, away from the presence of God (which is what heaven is), and kept at a distance by the angel with the flaming sword.

But now, because of the new Adam, Jesus, that way is opened once more. The waters of Baptism extinguish that sword, if you will. Your sins which caused you to be separated from God are washed away by God, and because of that you may now dwell in His presence.

This is true both in this life, where God comes to you, and also in the next. Because of the righteousness – all righteousness – given you in your Baptism, when you die, heaven is open. The angels aren't there with flaming swords to keep you out, but instead come and like with the poor beggar Lazarus carry you up to be in the peace and rest of God Himself.

And speaking of God's presence with you, that's another blessing shown in the Baptism of Jesus. The heavens are opened and the Holy Spirit descends upon Christ, showing Him to be anointed of the Lord.

When you were baptized, God the Holy Spirit descended out of heaven to come and dwell in your heart. And here again we have the reversal of an effect of sin seen in the Old Testament. As man begins to spread across the earth and become more and more wicked, the Lord declares that His Spirit shall not abide in man forever.

Yet in Baptism, the Holy Spirit does return, like the dove returning to the ark with an olive leaf, showing that God is once again at peace with us and will abide with us. We certainly didn't earn this, but rather God in His mercy and grace has reconciled us to Himself through the blood of His Son.

By His Spirit we are given faith, not just understanding the Gospel with our minds but trusting it in our hearts. By the Spirit, we believe those words which God has spoken to us, even when they don't make sense to us in a worldly way.

Those words include yet another blessing: the wonderful declaration that the Father speaks to His Son at His Baptism. We read, "and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'"

As Jesus comes up from the water, having confessed the sin of the entire world upon Himself, taking on the burden which He was born to bear, the Father makes it clear that this Jesus is His Son, whom He loves more than we men can comprehend, and that His Son's obedience to His plan of salvation is well pleasing to Him.

When you are baptized, these words of the Father are true for you as well. As we heard in last week's Epistle reading from Galatians, "for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." In Baptism, God makes you His children, His sons and daughters. You are joined to Christ, the one who was conceived by the Holy Spirit as we confess, when you were born of water and the Spirit.

This isn't your action any more than your physical birth was your action. Rather, this being born of God is God's doing. Note how Paul words it in our Epistle lesson: "And because of Him you are in Christ Jesus." Not because of you, but because of Him, because of God. God chose you to be His sons and daughters, and loves you as He loves His only-begotten Son.

You and I are not perfect – far from it – but because you are in Christ Jesus, God is well pleased with you. You don't have to earn God's love or favor; it is yours because of Jesus.

As Jesus went down into the waters of the Jordan, He did so to come to you, and me, and all men. His work there, and throughout His ministry, and throughout history, is not always understandable by us.

But because of what He tells us in His Word, shown in places such as His Baptism, we can be sure that He does it all to bring us to Himself. In Jesus, God comes to men, so that men, including each and every one of you, might be brought to God.

In the name of Jesus, amen.