

## **To Fulfill All Righteousness**

Matthew 3:13-17

January 13, 2008

### **I.**

Today we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ, one of the most important days on the church calendar. I have fond memories of this day because one year ago, after we celebrated our Lord's baptism in the morning, I was ordained to the priesthood in the afternoon. And Susan and I would like to thank all of you for making this past year a wonderful and fulfilling experience.

Two of today's readings tell us about the Messiah and the beginning of his ministry. The first is the Old Testament reading, which is one of several passages in the Book of Isaiah that, six centuries before Jesus' birth, proclaimed his coming as the suffering servant. Let's read part of it again. "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. A bruised reed he will not break, and he will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth" (42:1-4).

Then, in the Gospel we heard how Jesus was baptized by John and ordained by God to begin his ministry among us. Just as God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to proclaim his chosen servant, he also spoke from the heavens to consecrate the ministry of that servant on earth. And we see that the suffering servant described in Isaiah and the Son of God revealed in Matthew are one and the same person.

### **II.**

But before we look at today's reading, an interesting question comes up. Why did Jesus have to be baptized? He was the Son of God, and was without sin. And we know from the readings during Advent that John the Baptist preached repentance and offered baptism for the forgiveness of sin. So, what was the purpose of Jesus being baptized by John?

For many Christians, Jesus' baptism did three things. The first was that he identified with humanity in all our flaws and imperfections, and all of the weaknesses that lead us into disobedience of God's will for us. By being baptized Jesus expressed his willingness to take on our burdens. Even though he was free from any sin, his baptism began a journey to the cross where he took on all our sins.

Jesus' baptism also sanctified baptism and infused it with a holy character for all time. His baptism made our baptisms holy for us. When we are baptized in the church, we are linked to Jesus' death so that through faith we have the opportunity to share in his resurrection.

Finally, Jesus' baptism made baptism transformative for us, and by this I mean that when we are baptized something inwardly and internally holy actually happens. It's more than just words and gestures as we stand around the font. We enter into a new state of spiritual life in which we belong to God, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **III.**

So, having examined why Jesus was baptized, which is not explicit in today's reading but is confirmed elsewhere in Scripture, let's look at what actually happened at the Jordan River.

At first, when Jesus came to be baptized John thought he had everything backwards. John said Jesus should be baptizing him instead of the other way around. But Jesus insisted, saying that he and John had to do this together "to fulfill all righteousness."

But that did not mean righteousness would be fulfilled right then and there, on the spot. Rather it was the beginning of the fulfillment of Jesus' purpose on earth, to go to the cross for us. A few verses earlier John publicly proclaimed the coming of the Messiah that Isaiah had foretold, and we see that Jesus' baptism in today's Gospel was the official launching of that messianic ministry.

And there's more. Just as God spoke through Isaiah to say that he delighted in his servant who would be coming, he spoke again from the heavens to announce that his servant now was here. God said, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

What if something like this happened that involved ordinary people? Suppose Governor Barbour came to the coast and introduced someone who had a plan to bring about a quick and complete recovery from Katrina, and then said "I am very pleased with what he is going do." I expect we all would be on the edges of our seats. That new person would have our full attention.

#### **IV.**

From this background we can conclude that God's approval of Jesus' baptism was the beginning of the sacrament of baptism in the church today. But when we think about baptism as a sacrament, we recognize that baptisms are not treated in the same way by everyone.

For some people it's the beginning of a fulfilling and rewarding Christian life. Baptism can lead them to grow in Christ and experience the lives they are called by their Creator to live. For others, however, baptism unfortunately can be something like the story of the bats in the belfry.

You might have heard this story before. It goes like this. Three priests were attending a clergy conference, and were discussing a common problem for all of them. The three priests all served at very old churches with very old buildings built years ago. Over time, it seems, that colonies of bats moved in and began living in the attic of one church, in the loft of another, and in the belfry of the third.

The first priest, with bats in the attic, said that he had used exterminators and fumigators, and nothing seemed to work. The bats were still there. The second priest, with bats in the loft, said he had tried loud noises and brought in some cats, but even that did not work.

Well, the third priest, who had bats in the church belfry, slowly smiled and said, "I went up there and baptized all my bats, made them members of the church, and they haven't been back since."

This story points out that for some people baptism is just something to be done, and that's all there is to it. It's just a box to be checked in life before moving on to the next item on the list.

But baptism means more, a lot more. As we think about why Jesus was baptized for us, we also might think about our own baptisms. What, exactly, is our own self-understanding of this important event? What do we think it means? How does baptism fit into our common life here at St. Thomas?

Many of us probably cannot even recall our baptisms. We were baptized as infants and, even though we have tried to lead the Christian lives that flow from baptism, we have no memory of it occurring. And others of us who were baptized later in life still might not remember it as an especially important event.

After all, we're here in church, aren't we? We have pretty much done what our baptisms called us to do in terms of living Christian lives, haven't we? Producing good fruit is what's important, so why think too much about the seed that was planted long ago?

Well, I would like to suggest that our spiritual lives can be enriched and uplifted by a deeper understanding of what really happened to us when we went to the font, or the pool, or the river, and through baptism became members of the Body of Christ.

The point I'm about to make is one I have made before. But the subject of baptism has come up before in our readings and so, it would seem, that God wants us to pay a little more attention to it.

When Jesus was baptized the entire Holy Trinity was evident. The Father spoke from the heavens, the Son was in the water, and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove.

We also are baptized in name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and for us the Holy Spirit moves in a way that is central to our baptism. And I want to stress the importance of what actually happens at the font up here during baptism. In some ways Christian baptism is like Christian marriage. The words that the priest says actually cause something to happen. They are more than just words.

During a marriage ceremony, for example, the priest pronounces at the appropriate time that the couple are husband and wife, and those words actually make it happen. They are not husband and wife until the priest says it, and they are husband and wife immediately upon it being said. If something unexpected would intervene to stop the marriage ceremony at that point, they still would be married.

The same thing occurs during baptism. At the conclusion of the ritual, the priest says "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." That's when it happens. You can't see it but it's there. That's when we inwardly receive the Holy Spirit purely through God's grace and the Spirit is sealed within us as a sort of glowing ember.

And we always will have that ember inside us even if we go through periods of unbelief or sin. But merely having the Spirit as an ember is not enough. Having the ember does not automatically mean that we have faith. That ember, to be truly effective in an outward way, must be fanned into flames so that it acts upon us, and through us, and enables us to live fruitful and abundant lives in Christ. And those flames can appear in a moment, but for most of us they build in a gradually unfolding process. The end result is the same either way.

## V.

Today's Gospel tells us that through baptism, Jesus affirmed that he would carry out God's will. In our baptism we enter into a covenant to do the same. In many cases the words of our Baptismal Covenant were spoken for us before we could say them ourselves. In others cases we might actually remember them. I pray that those words are never far from our hearts and minds, and I would like to read them today. Here again are the promises of our baptisms by which we are bound to our Lord and Savior. They are:

- To continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer.
- To persevere in resisting evil, and, when we fall into sin, to repent and return to the Lord.
- To proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.
- To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.
- To strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every person.

Powerful words. They express strong promises. They confirm that we are members of the Body of Christ. They are the way to a holy life. And when the Holy Spirit goes before us we know that we cannot fail. *Amen.*