

January 7, 2017  
Baptism of Our Lord

“The God Pleasing Life”

Mark 1:4-11

The differences are kind of subtle, and some folks might say theologians and exegetes of Holy Scripture read too much into things, but if you allow for some latitude in reading between the lines, a deep, deep truth is reflected in today’s Gospel reading.

Mark writes, *“John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”* And then later, *“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’”*

Now the first difference really isn’t all that subtle; Judea and Jerusalem get baptized by John “confessing their sins,” Jesus does not. And I would hope that any Christian out of diapers would be able to say, “Duh. Jesus has no sin. He has nothing to confess.” This is true.

The second difference is much understated. All of Judea and Jerusalem go in the river Jordan, but it’s not said they come out. Jesus, on the other hand, is clearly said to be coming out of the water. On the face of things this doesn’t seem like a big deal. But if you consider when it was that ancient Israel truly came into the fulfillment of the Old Covenant with God, it would be when they passed through the river Jordan and came up out of it into the Promised Land. But Mark doesn’t say they’re coming out of the river now, only Jesus.

And now consider that when all those Jews are getting baptized nothing remarkable happens. The heavens don’t open. No voice speaks to them. Jesus, quite obviously is different. The Father speaks *“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”* But consider this in light of the prophet Hosea’s words, *“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”* The Father at one time considered these Jews a son, but no longer. Only Jesus is a Son who is pleasing to the Father.

The deep, deep truth all this points to is that Jesus, is it. There is not any other human being of which the Father says *“With you I am well pleased.”* It is a very simple truth, but it is one that needs to be clearly spoken, even here in church...maybe especially here in church.

Throughout the Bible narratives and throughout human history mankind has had this strange idea of thinking they somehow please God. The pagan nations surrounding ancient Israel attempted this through their sacrifices and detestable worship practices as well as did many other cultures in history all over the world. The Jews themselves got God’s instructions backward, thinking the tabernacle and temple were the places they did works to please God, when, in fact, it all was God’s gift covering their shortcomings and pointing toward the coming Messiah and allowing a righteous God to dwell in the midst of His sinful people.

Today we do the same thing. In a ton of conversations, I hear Christians talking about their going to church as “doing the right thing” as if this Divine Service is centered on what we’re doing to please God. That’s not the point here. The point is what God is giving us here through Word and Sacrament—forgiveness, life and salvation.

Let’s face it, by the world’s standards good church folk are just that; good church folk. Our society is bettered by law abiding, God-fearing, neighbor loving, people. We may have our

individual vices and hidden sins, but for the most part as far as everybody else is concerned, we're well-behaved. That pleases people. That pleases society. That pleases us.

It doesn't please God.

There is only one human being since the Fall that has pleased God—His Son, Jesus Christ. The very instant we start thinking that it is me; my works, my worship, my service, my offering, even my faith, we're turning away from the only place where God's good pleasure is found; in His Son Jesus Christ.

Of course it is most certainly true that in your Holy Baptism, in the Lord's Supper, in confession and absolution you are forgiven, made righteous, made acceptable and pleasing to God. But all of this is done in, with and through Jesus Christ alone. You're not pleasing to God because of you. You're pleasing to God because in these things you are wrapped in the Father's beloved Son with whom He is well pleased.

Holy Baptism is a place where this distinction can be made clear. We're baptized. Did heaven open and the Father announce His pleasure with you at your baptism? No. He only has done that once, with Jesus.

But St. Paul makes clear what did happen in your baptism; *"We were buried therefore with [Jesus] by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."*

Our Holy Baptism is the whole boatload of salvation not because it is ours, but because it joins us into Christ Jesus, with whom the Father is well pleased...with whom the Father is so pleased that He is raised from death to glory, kingship and life eternal.

But I run into a whole lot of folks who have been baptized, but it is only their baptism because they have walked away from the Jesus present in that washing. They think they did that baptism and pleased God, or at least that it made them pleasing to God in and of themselves. The really sad part is that I run into some of these people when they're already dead, because the family wants me to do a funeral service and the only evidence they can give me that the person was a Christian is that way back when, years ago, he or she was baptized and I can't see the Jesus, the one with whom God is pleased, has been around much since.

Good Christian folks can be the same way...we just hide it better.

So I just want to be really clear about the Gospel good news today. This good news is not that you have pleased God. This good news is that God sent One into our flesh that the Father could and would be well pleased with one human being, and through Him with all humanity that abides in Him and His name. The Gospel good news is that abiding in Him by faith is a free gift open to all by the Word, the water and the Supper. You have indeed been forgiven, resurrected and gifted the kingdom in Christ Jesus.

The warning today is simply to remember that this kingdom is only in and of Christ Jesus. It's not you. It's Him; always and only Him.

So stop trying to please God yourself. Seek to wrap yourself in Jesus in all you say, think and do. In that the Father says, "You are my beloved Son, with you, and all who are in you, I am well pleased."