

Claimed

As the introduction to the gospel text this morning made clear today's passage is about the baptism of Jesus Christ by that other prominent figure in the early church's narrative about Christ. That figure was John who is known as the Baptizer in all four of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. Each year, no matter which gospel account for that year is the focus of the scripture readings from the New Testament when we reach this third Sunday after Christmas, we look at this event. There are several reasons for this, not the least of which is that the earliest followers of Jesus took this event as a confirmation of Jesus' identity. John's baptism of Jesus was viewed as the anointing of Jesus by God to be the Messiah of God's people. It was the clear signal of the arrival of the promised one who would redeem them, although their interpretation of what their redemption meant did not exactly coincide with God's plan of redemption. As I listed before I read the passage from Luke, each of the gospels describes this baptism of Jesus. Each of them also has something to say about this John the Baptizer. In Matthew, Mark, and John's gospel as well as earlier in Luke's gospel, John the Baptizer appears as the voice crying the wilderness that comes with a proclamation calling for repentance. This call is drawn from the prophet Isaiah who declares that there will be a voice in the wilderness which will come to prepare the way of the Lord. This repentance is needed because the Lord's coming redemption will include the concept of judgment. Luke 3:3 tells us "He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." When baptizing those who come to him John is telling all the various groups who come out to hear him in the wilderness to change their ways; to begin to live differently. Each group is given a type of prescription for modifying their way of life so that it would fit into the ways God had established long ago. John's proclamations have gathered crowds. Our text opens this morning in chapter 3 verse 15 with "as the people were filled with expectations, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah. ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'" John continues in an unsettling vein about this baptism of fire and Spirit which is coming saying, "his winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Now I can't say I have ever seen a winnowing fork, but the image is of something that separates the valuable from that which isn't; the grain from the chaff which is thrown into the fire. I included verses 18-20 which strictly speaking weren't included in the lectionary reading for two reasons. These verses say that John makes many other exhortations to his audiences, proclaiming the good news to the people—calling them to repent—calling them to change the way they were living—because someone more powerful than he was coming and in his view that was good news for that which wasn't good—would be separated and thrown into the fire. In other words, John felt those who came and repented, were baptized and thus were forgiven would be gathered into the granary, but those others...well there was that unquenchable fire awaiting them. In those verses not included in today's lectionary reading, Luke already foreshadows what happens when the powerful of the world are rebuked—John is imprisoned by Herod. After that short sidebar which the lectionary invites us to ignore, we are told that Jesus has joined the crowd which evidently having repented is

being baptized—verse 21: “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” This is one of those places where the differences in the various narratives become important in understanding something about an event. When Luke tells us about Jesus’ baptism, it is a description of a private moment. Jesus is praying. He is speaking the one he had called his Father when he was in the Temple at twelve years of age. Luke’s description is that heaven was opened and a dove descended upon Jesus and a voice was heard speaking directly to Jesus: “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you, I am well pleased.” What we often overlook in our seizing upon this moment of God’s identification of Jesus as his beloved Son is that although Jesus is among that crowd of sinners, who have been called to repent of their sins, Jesus has nothing of which to repent. In the gospel of Matthew, John even protests that there is something amiss in Jesus’ coming to him for baptism saying that Jesus as the one more powerful than he should instead baptize him. Again, in Matthew the baptism signals the opening of the heavens, the descent of the dove and the voice declaring Jesus God’s Son, the Beloved, establishing Jesus’ identity as God’s son. The narration confirms Jesus’ identity. And again, we usually overlook John’s objections to Jesus’ request for baptism. Yet there is a crucial point here that was made for us about three weeks ago when we celebrated the incarnation. Jesus is Emmanuel—God with us. That is the reason why Jesus went to the River Jordan and asked John the Baptist to baptize him with the baptism of repentance. Not because he needed to be baptized by John, but because we needed to have our sins forgiven. That is why Jesus went into the Jordan and was baptized in that baptism for repentance for the forgiveness of sins which he did not have but which we do. Jesus went there to stand with us and for us. For some reason the images which seem to cling most clearly in our minds to the meaning of baptism are those associated with the baptism of water associated with John’s baptism of repentance which is not what we are symbolizing with the sacrament of baptism. Perhaps it is the continued use of water that complicates or confuses the issue for us. Perhaps it is the very nature of water itself as water is and always has been used for cleaning and purifying. This baptism of Jesus by John was very significant in another way as it was the starting point for Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. During his ministry Jesus did many things. He healed, he cast out demons, he taught. He performed miracles. He walked on water. He called disciples. But Jesus himself did not baptize any disciples, although he commanded them to go into the world and baptize others teaching them to obey what he had taught them. So today in the Reformed tradition of the Christian faith we have two sacraments: Baptism and Communion. And for us, baptism is a symbol and sign of God’s grace and claiming. God has spoken many times and in many ways telling us that as it appears in Isaiah 43: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” So it is with a sense of joy that we celebrate the baptism of the Lord Jesus each and every year as a sign and symbol that God came and dwelt among us. That Emmanuel’s baptism paved the way for us sinners who have been claimed by the one who was without sin to be forgiven. The water of our baptism is not the water of repentance but the water of the Holy Spirit which claims us. Thanks be to God.