

First Sunday After Epiphany – January 11, 2015, Year B

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 1:7-11 and various

“God's Beloved Son”

Today we celebrate a wonderfully miraculous event – during which Jesus goes into the River Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist. All four of the Gospels have accounts of this remarkable event. This is much more than a symbolic event – it is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the acceptance of the sins of the world by the Savior of the world.

John the Baptist is much more than a baptizer and much more than a relative of Jesus. Remember during Advent when we read of the account of Mary visiting her older cousin Elizabeth near Jerusalem? Elizabeth was pregnant with John, who leapt in his mother's womb at the presence of the unborn Jesus in Mary's womb. The relationship deepens when we look at John's father Zechariah. Zechariah is a priest of the Temple in Jerusalem, *"Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John." (Luke 1:8-13)* It was during this visitation of the Angel Gabriel that Zechariah questioned the words that he had been told – and so he was made silent until the Lord lifted that silence upon the circumcision and naming of John.

The important thing to remember about Zechariah is that he is a priest. A priest of the Temple has a unique privilege of laying the sins of the Jewish world upon the scape goat on the Day of Atonement – Yom Kippur – and then sending that goat out into the wilderness until its death. I would like to suggest to you that God was doing something very much more than just a baptism during the Baptism of Jesus. Please consider that God has John the Baptist – in the Levitical line of priests – lay hands on the Messiah – the one who takes on the sins of the whole world – and sends Him out into the world – into the wilderness. In a sense God made this a day of atonement for the whole world. John did much more than that – as he set the stage for Jesus' ministry by preaching the need for repentance in the face of the coming Kingdom of God. Jesus insisted on being baptized by John – giving His endorsement to the Baptist's ministry – and God in turn gives His endorsement with His words during the baptism. Please remember the words of John the Baptist – who said *“Behold the Lamb of God- who takes away the sins of the world.”*

It is also important to note that this event is so important that it appears in ALL FOUR Gospels - in Mark 1: 1-11, Matthew 3:13-17, Luke 3:1-22, and John 1:31-34. We are given a view that this event marks the beginning of Jesus's earthly ministry – as Jesus would proceed from the Jordan – across from Jericho and go out into the wilderness – where He would be tempted by Satan.

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I believe that there seems to be several important reasons why Jesus was baptized.

- The first reason is that He would fulfill all righteousness. The baptism represented Jesus being consecrated to God the Father and then being approved by Him. All of God's righteousness requirements for the Messiah were fulfilled by Jesus.
- The second reason for Jesus' baptism was the public announcement by John the Baptist of the arrival of the Messiah that he had been preaching about.
- And finally, His baptism allowed Jesus to fully identify with man's sinfulness and failure (even though Jesus had no sin Himself) He carried our sins, but not a sinner, becoming our substitute – like the "scape goat."

Something else amazing happened with Jesus' baptism. We are given a glimpse of the presence of the Trinity – present right before mankind for the very first time. Jesus is baptized and arises from the Jordan – something amazing takes place – and that is that the voice of God the Father is heard saying "*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*" What son doesn't like to hear his father say – "son I am proud of you?" At the same time the heavens opened and the "*Spirit descending on him like a dove.*" What an amazing spectacle – there in the Jordan River – but not the first time this spot was the site of God's amazing power.

Listen to this account from Joshua 3: 15-17 "*Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (the Salt Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho. The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.*" God showed the world another miracle – like the one at the Red Sea – the ground was dry - only it took place right across from Jericho – as God's people crossed into the Promised Land. But God was not done using this place – or His people!

It was at this place across from Jericho in the Jordan River another amazing event took place. Listen to this and what God did: "*Fifty men of the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan.*" "*Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.*" (2 Kings 2:7-8) Does this sound familiar? Just as with Joshua and the Ark of the Covenant the Jordan rolled back! But wait – God is not done yet. The Biblical account continues: "*As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.*" "*Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart.*" "*He picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan.*" "*Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. "Where now is the LORD, the God of*

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Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over. The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him." (2 Kings 2:11-15)

Remember how I have often said that God loves to use the same place many times to display His power and glory and His love for us? Let's return to the accounts of Jesus' baptism. "As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove." "And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."" (Mark 1:10-11) At this place across from Jericho in the Jordan River, which has three times seen the river separate – now witnesses a different thing. Instead of the river parting in two – "*heaven was torn open,*" something only God Himself could do to draw attention to what was about to happen. All four gospels describe the Holy Spirit descending as a dove from heaven to fall upon and fill Jesus, both God and Man, and give Him strength to go into His earthly ministry – carrying the sins of mankind and give Him strength to carry out the mission for which He became man in the first place. The humanity of Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit so that He would be able to face Satan – head on - in the wilderness and resist the temptations that the devil threw at Him. He would then proclaim in the synagogue in Nazareth (from a scroll of Isaiah 61) "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" (Luke 4:18-19) These words had been foretold by the Prophet Isaiah 600 years before Jesus was born – in Isaiah 61 – and were being fulfilled in the life of Jesus.

The Baptism of Jesus was just the beginning of three years in which Jesus would show the world God's love for His people in Word and deed – ultimately coming to the greatest demonstration of His love for us by willingly climbing a mountain and lying on the cross – to be nailed and lifted – humiliated – and forgiving His murderers before He breathed His last.

That day in the Jordan God the Father spoke in the presence of the Son and the Holy Spirit – revealing that Jesus is the Son of God: "*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*" (Mark 1:11) Similar words were again spoken by God the Father, recorded in Luke 9:35 and Matthew 17:5 when Jesus appeared on a mountain believed to be Mount Hermon, (the Transfiguration) north of the Galilee with Moses and Elijah – revealing His true glorious nature "*While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"*

God has never tried to hide His Messiah from His people; He has spoken about Him from the very beginning of time and even pointedly told the world who He is at the baptism in the Jordan and at the Transfiguration. God wants the world to accept Jesus and believe in Him so that the entire world can be saved. I want to add these words from the Gospel of John. A gentleman came to visit Jesus at night – for fear of being discovered – named Nicodemus. He asked Jesus about being "born again" and Jesus told him "*For God so loved the world that He*

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sent His only Son – that whoever believe in Him shall NOT perish, but have eternal life.”

Those who accept and believe in Jesus can be saved. Jesus received our sins that day in the Jordan from the son of a priest – and would carry them to the cross – defeating sin and death – so that we can in essence be washed free from our sins – like the waters of the Jordan on our souls.