

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

“Cleansed”

Today we do celebrate a special event in the life of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. All four Gospels record the momentous occasion in the life of Jesus that we read today in Luke's Holy Gospel, which signaled the official beginning of His public ministry. You know, if you see an event once in a Gospel it is important. If it is in two of the Gospels, then pay attention. If it is in three of the Gospels, then sit up and pay attention. If it is in four of the Gospels, then you can “take it to the bank” that this is very important for you to know and to remember. Luke condensed his account more than the other three Gospel writers. The purpose of Jesus' baptism was to anoint Our Lord with the Holy Spirit and to give authenticity to Him by the Father for beginning His ministry. The heavenly voice that is heard echoes words of Isaiah the prophet, commissioning the Messiah as the Servant, the one who will suffer and die for the people and the world. (Isaiah 42:1) *"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations."* Doesn't that go right alongside God's words “My beloved Son?” Lining up right behind this are echoes of Genesis 22:2. If you know me and you have been to church when one of the readings is Genesis 22, that is where I zero in because that is where Abraham is told to take his only son to a mountain in the Moriah region to be sacrificed. We all know the trip that God's only Son made up that very same mountain – carrying the wood for His sacrifice on His back.

John the Baptist baptized people as a sign and symbol that they had turned away (repented) from their sin. The actual baptism symbolizes cleansing, a washing away of our sins through the blood of Jesus, a drowning to the sinful nature and a rising with a new Christ-like nature. Jesus never sinned, so you might wonder why He would go to John to be baptized. This, I believe was a way that Jesus could identify with all people and their sin. Another reason was that this would mark the official beginning of Jesus' public ministry. After 30 years of what one might call relative obscurity, Jesus would now begin to do the work of His Father in a VERY public way. Isn't it amazing that everyone present heard the absolute approval, in hearing the voice of God the Father, along with the visible presence of the Holy Spirit? God made it perfectly clear that Jesus was His Son. In His baptism Jesus identified Himself with sinners even though He was not a sinner Himself.

Jesus' participation in the sacrament of Baptism showed the world that He not only identified with us in our sinful condition, but that He also had to come to cleanse us from that condition, that sin, to bear our burdens and to suffer the penalty on our behalf. What is it Jesus says? “Come to Me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” He wants our burdens; He wants to take our sin; our shame; our guilt! Brothers and sisters in Christ, there is not one person in this church who has been baptized that needs to walk around hanging their head in shame, or in guilt. You have been freed from that! The enemy wants to keep reminding you what you did when you were 13; or what you did when you were 40. Forget it! In Brooklyn they say “fahgettaboudit!” Forget about it! Jesus took it from you when He went to the cross.

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Oh, when He went to the cross! No wonder He was stooped over; He was carrying everything we have and everything we will commit. That was the purpose. That is why He came.

I find it very interesting that John's father, Zechariah, was a priest. It was the job of a priest in the temple to lay hands on a sacrificial goat, a scape goat, and send it out into the wilderness, with all of the sins of Israel. Do you know who our scape goat is? Jesus! John the Baptist as one of the priestly line lay hands on Jesus in the river that day and those sins then became His. He never committed any but He carried them. He bore our sins and therefore gave us freedom. Please, do not carry any of the garbage around with you one more moment. Thank Jesus today that He freed you from it. If you still feel a burden, when our time of confession comes up this morning – give it ALL to Him. When I give the absolution on behalf of Our Lord and Savior, receive that as freedom. It is incredible!

Do you recall the words that John spoke about Jesus when he pointed Him out? He said "*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29) Did you notice the word "takes" is not a past, but it is something that keeps happening; He continues, He continues to take the sins of the world. People had previously wanted to know if John, the one who was calling people to change, to repent, to turn away from their sins – was the Messiah. John knew one thing – that he wasn't, and as we heard him say in today's Gospel "*John answered them all, 'I baptize you with water, but one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.'*" (Luke 3:16)

Jesus of Nazareth was baptized to remove any doubt that He was God's Messiah. God had informed John, the son of the priest, Zechariah that he would be able to recognize the Messiah after the Holy Spirit had descended from heaven on a particular person and then remained on that person. We have the evidence of that in today's Gospel. Listen to these words from John himself: "*I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'*" "*I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.*" (John 1:33-34)

There was another reason that Jesus' baptism was significant: it is one of the few instances in the Bible in which all three members of the Holy Trinity are present and clearly identified, for the world to know. Not only for those who were present that day, but it has been written down in all four Gospels, so that we may take notice, so that we may remember and carry it with us. God the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus, who is God the Son, in the form of a dove. The dove is a gentle bird, normally associated with purity and with peace. I want to suggest to you that the main reason for the visible presence of the Holy Spirit was to graphically demonstrate that He was empowering Jesus for the work that the Father had sent Him to do. God the Father spoke and declared His love for His Son. I believe that there can be no stronger evidence of the Trinity than that!

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God made it clear that He was pleased with Jesus. Up to that point Jesus had lived in relative anonymity. He had not performed any recorded miracles, preached a sermon, or even begun His public ministry. God had shown that He was delighted with Jesus!

There is great significance of where Jesus' baptism took place. The Jordan River was and is the source of life for the people of Israel. It runs from the north (in the mountains) all the way into the Sea of Galilee, and then to the south, into the Dead Sea. This freshwater body is the source of the drinking water for Israel today, as a pipeline carries the precious water throughout the Holy Land. The water which comes from the mountains in the north originates as melting snow and during the spring rages down through the Jordan Valley, the river which in most places in no wider than this room, overflows its banks and is a true symbol of moving or "living water."

As many of you know, through some sermons or some testimonies, that I was blessed for my right leg to be healed in the Jordan River in June of 1999 as Marilyn and I reaffirmed our baptisms along with others on that trip. It is a powerful memory for me, and one that I can never erase, experiencing the cleansing by that river. In November of 2015, when our Bishop was here, little Lyla Grace Evans was baptized here at St. Andrew's using water that was drawn from the Jordan, as I am sure many have done before. The water itself holds no special power, but can serve to remind us of that miraculous event that we celebrate in today's Holy Gospel – the Baptism of Our Lord and Savior Jesus. The Sacrament of Baptism also should remind us of the significance of water and the Holy Spirit opening for us new life in the Body of Christ, the Church.

In my life, the healing opened my heart to be prepared for God's call on my life, and on my family – as two days later on June 24, 1999 I heard God's call to me – to serve Him as a priest in His church – in grateful obedience. The reaffirming of our baptisms, and the healing that took place, allowing me to run up the steps of the baptismal place, called Yardenit, was unbelievable. I ran up the steps, the people that were on the trip with us had known the difficulty that I had even trying to walk to some of the sites; but no longer! It was amazing, my leg started to burn, went numb, and the pain has been gone ever since. I can say this to you – be careful what you say to God – if you say to Him "thank you Lord, I am so grateful, I will do anything you want" – He will take you up on it, as is evidenced here. You see, by what He did two thousand years ago in the Jordan River, it allowed me to understand the importance of what Jesus did. It allowed me to have the desire to give God permission to use me, to have Him do whatever He wanted, for His glory, in thanksgiving for taking that intense pain from me, which is still gone today! It was not only that pain, the pain of sin that He took from us because of His sacrifice.

We have all been baptized, most of us as babies, just like Lyla Grace and others. This moment in our lives is to be the beginning of a life meant to work for the Kingdom of God. Just as Jesus began His public ministry working for God's Kingdom – we too should be doing this – it is never too late to get started. I ask you to be open to His call on your life and be willing to serve Him, with excellence, just as Jesus did.