

The Baptism of Our Lord

Luke 3:15-22

Jesus' baptism was an affirmation from His Father. Our baptism is a proclamation from our Father that Jesus has paid the price for our sin and made us worthy. Worthy for what?

In our baptism the Holy Spirit takes up residence within us (vs.16). Luther said the Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, sanctifies and enlightens.” The Holy Spirit is our great Motivator. He reminds us continually of our need to center our lives in Jesus. He motivates us to emulate Jesus.

Jesus showed us how to live. He described Himself as a servant, and He made it clear that His followers are also to be servants. You and I have been given everything. Not only have we been freely given salvation, but all that we have or need is provided by God. He has given us much. What does He want back from us?

As Lutherans we sometimes balk at the thought that God would ask anything of us. We falsely believe that such an idea smacks of the dreaded “works righteousness,” so we err in the direction of doing nothing. Jesus, to the contrary, commanded us to do much: to put His will ahead of our own; to love Him above all else; to love one another; serve one another, care for our neighbors, and to speak and demonstrate the Gospel of salvation to anyone who will listen. This command has nothing to do with our salvation but everything to do with our sanctification.

At our baptism God made us His own children. The Holy Spirit became our live-in Guide. He motivates us to serve in our world as a response to our Lord's gift.

What does Jesus seek from you? Writing a check for the church is pretty easy, but Jesus did more than write out checks to the local synagogue. Jesus gave Himself. A new year is just getting started. Have you decided to move beyond giving checks? Is one of your resolutions to give *yourself* back to God, to become His tool in our world? It is an option, not a requirement, but one that God hopes you will choose as His child.

Is reading the Bible a part of your new year?

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

The Baptism of Our Lord

Luke 3:15-22

1. In addition to the baptism account in Luke read about Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:13-17; and Mark 1:9-11. Why did Jesus insist on being baptized? What other details of the baptism are significant?
2. How does John the Baptist compare His person and work with Jesus? How was their role different?
3. What hints do vs. 18-20 give us about the fate of John the Baptist? What ultimately happened to him?

For Family Reflection

4. How were all three persons of the Trinity represented at Jesus baptism? How were the three persons noted at your baptism?
5. Why symbol of the Holy Spirit is noted at Jesus' baptism (vs. 22)? Where do you see that symbol in your church?
6. We remember Jesus' baptism today. Remember your baptism also. When were you baptized? Who were your sponsors? What blessings did you receive at your baptism?

Second Sunday After Christmas

Luke 2:40-52

Have you ever been so distressed at having a "missing" child that when you finally do find him or her unharmed, you instantly become angry and blame them for the fact that you couldn't find them? I had that happen one time. While spending a week with my grandparents, I decided to go upstairs for a nap. Of course I didn't tell anyone. Upon waking I discovered that my grandmother and aunt had been scouring the neighborhood for me. I'm still not sure why that was my fault.

When we deliberately cause our parents worry and frustration, that is a sin. Jesus' sitting with the teachers at the temple was not a deliberate defiance of His parents, nor was it a sin.

Passover was a huge annual celebration of the Jew's rescue from Egypt, remembering the last plague (the death of the firstborn) which resulted in freedom. Of the feasts that required the attendance of Jewish males, Passover was the one that almost everyone attended, even if they lived many miles from Jerusalem. You can imagine the hubbub and confusion as tens of thousands headed home after the celebration ended. In the mass family exit, Jesus had been overlooked. He was twelve years old, so Mary and Joseph probably assumed that He was with the other boys of the family.

From His conversation in the temple, it is pretty obvious that Jesus knew His mission even before His teenage years. His answers and His questions amazed the adults present. His depth of wisdom indicates that even at twelve Jesus was beyond those who would teach Him the Jewish faith.

There is something in the last verses of this passage that we can learn from as parents, sons and daughters. Even though Jesus was the Son of God and knew Himself to be wiser than His teachers or parents, "He continued in subjection to them." No matter what our age, or our I.Q., or our wisdom, we are never too advanced to listen; to obey those God has put in authority in our lives; to place God's will above our own.

Paul (Eph. 5:21-6:9) gives us guidelines in respecting and loving one another. His words are especially meaningful when we realize that even the Son of God lived by the same standard.

Have you begun a new visit to the Bible this month?

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Second Sunday After Christmas

Luke 2:40-52

1. The Gospel writer Luke quickly jumps from Jesus' infancy (Luke 2:1-39) to Jesus as a 12 year-old boy. What other events in Jesus' childhood does Scripture record? (Matthew chapter 2) Why is there so little information on Jesus' childhood?
2. What took Jesus' family to Jerusalem every year? Using the study Bible or other reference find out why this ritual was important to the family? What other rituals were important to Jewish families?
3. How could Jesus have been separated from His parents? Were they negligent in their care of Him? How does Jesus explain His separation? (vs. 49)
4. How does verse 52 explain the maturity of Jesus? For what was the Father preparing His Son?

For Family Reflection

5. What rituals are important to your family? Is going to God's house a priority for your family? How are your family members increasing "in favor with God and man." (vs. 52)
6. What do you suppose Jesus' life was like as a teenager and young adult? How was His life similar to those of children today? How was His life different?

Second Sunday After The Epiphany

John 2:1-11

Sometimes we fall into the trap of believing that Jesus doesn't care about the day-to-day events of our lives. We even teach our children, by our actions, that they shouldn't bother God with anything but major events or needs. Surely God is too busy to bother with financial needs, arguments in the family, sick pets, or vacation plans. Perhaps He would be offended if we talk to Him too much, or ask about too many "little" things. Maybe that attitude is why our prayers tend to become weekly events--events led by the pastor in worship service on Sunday.

In today's passage, John tells us about the first "sign" of Jesus' ministry. As with other signs, like raising a mother's son from the dead, healing the sick, feeding five thousand (that's just the number of men present), or calming stormy seas, this sign of Jesus' divinity began with His compassion for people in everyday situations. There were many signs inspired by His compassion that are not listed in Scripture. Several times the gospel writers wrote simply that He "healed all that were ill" (Matt. 8:16 is one example). Jesus loved people. He laughed; He cried; He shared people's lives; and He cared. He still has that same compassion for you and for me.

When we laugh, when we cry, when we hope or need, Jesus is there with us. He wants to hear our problems and celebrate our victories. All we do is believe in His presence, His love, and His power into our lives.

Jesus once said of Jerusalem, "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were unwilling" (Matt.23:37). Jesus was speaking of a rebellious nation and people, but perhaps we can glean from these words His great desire to participate fully in our families and in our lives. God wants us to speak to Him and to listen to Him everyday concerning everything.

Have you invited a friend to attend a regular Bible study with you?

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Second Sunday After The Epiphany

John 2:1-11

1. What role did Mary, Jesus' mother, play in the first miracle? How do we see Mary's faith in her Son (vs. 5)?
2. How do we know that the additional wine was provided by Jesus and not brought out of some hidden supply?
3. What's the significance of John's use of the word "sign" (vs. 11)? What other "signs" does John tell about?

For Family Reflection

4. What do we learn about Jesus as we see Him at weddings and other events? Is Jesus present at our weddings and other special events?
5. What was the purpose of Jesus' miracles (vs. 11)? What was the result of His miracles? Does learning about Jesus' miracles increase our faith in Him?
6. It's the Epiphany season of the church year! What colors do you see on the altar? What's special about this season? What do we learn about Jesus? What do we have to share about Jesus?

Third Sunday After The Epiphany

Luke 4:16-30

Galilee was a small area in northern Palestine. According to a contemporary governor-turned-historian named Josephus, over three million people lived there. Jesus' hilltop hometown of Nazareth overlooked thirty miles of countryside. It was a beautiful place to live. The people of Galilee, and Nazareth, were considered wide open to new ideas, but when Jesus proclaimed His ministry in His home synagogue, it was the most revolutionary news that they had ever heard. And--they didn't like it.

A few years ago a politician remarked that he attended church "regularly." When pressed by a reporter, he responded that he attended church "ten or twelve times a year." I guess "regularly" depends on your point of view. Jesus attended worship regularly, but His definition of regularly was somewhat different from the politician's. Also, there was something more in Jesus attendance than just being there. He understood what His Father had in mind; what the prophets had said; the importance of prayerfully seeking His Father's will.

The majority of the synagogue members in Nazareth were present in body, but it appears that they were not spiritually alert to God's word or to His will, for they failed to recognize His Son.

What about us? Do we worship in expectation of growing our personal relationship with our Father? Do we listen to His word, or are we just taking up pew space on Sundays? If Jesus stood among us, would we recognize Him as the Son of God? Apparently His own neighbors didn't have the spiritual awareness to do so.

The Holy Spirit wants to lead us in our worship, whether in church on Sunday or in our private devotions. He reveals the truth to us about our Savior. The attitude of Nazareth should seriously remind us that we live in a world where even some "Christians" deny the truth about Jesus. It is our calling, by the leading of the Holy Spirit, to continually celebrate God's truth and affirm it in our lives every day.

Are you in a weekly Bible Study?

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Third Sunday After The Epiphany

Luke 4:16-30

1. Mark's Gospel makes a brief comment about John's imprisonment. Go to Matthew 14:3-12 to find out the reason for this sentence and the ultimate fate of John the Baptist.
2. What was the content of Jesus' message to the world (vs. 15)? Why was this "good news"?
3. What was the occupation of Jesus' first disciples? How was Jesus going to change their calling?

For Family Reflection

4. The disciples left their nets and followed Jesus. What did (do) you have to leave behind to follow Him?
5. Jesus' message to His world was "repent." Why is this call still necessary today for the world and for each one of us individually? For what sins do you need to repent? What is God's Good News to you?
6. An emphasis of the Epiphany season is witnessing to others. Where is God calling you to "go fishing" in your family, in your community, and into the world? Can your family (or your church) consider praying for and financially supporting a missionary?

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Luke 4:31-44

You see, these caring but deluded religious fanatics were bringing their friends to Jesus for healing. The stories saying that He did heal them must have been made up by the New Testament authors to help promote their new religion centered on Jesus. That is a terrible statement, but there are many who would agree. However, to deny the many, many miracles that Jesus worked is to deny the signs of His divinity. Some then, and some now, deny the miraculous proofs that Jesus was God's Son. Miracles just don't make sense to them.

Today, we take our friends who suffer illness, grief or any life-disturbing problem to Jesus through prayer, since literally taking them to Jesus would be a little difficult. Unfortunately, we usually resist the temptation of telling our friends that we are praying for them unless we know that they are dyed-in-the-wool Christians. What would happen if we told an unbelieving friend that we were praying for them? Their response might surprise us. I doubt that very many would say, "Don't bother." Most would simply say "Thank you."

What does that say about the apparent dichotomy between what physically well unbelievers profess and sick unbelievers profess? It demonstrates that bringing people to the Savior to be healed of the most serious illness (eternal separation from God) is not hopeless.

The financial and morally confusing situation in our country today is hurting everyone, especially those who do not have the assurance of knowing Christ. While at the coffee shop with fellow workers or friends or relatives, listen to what is bothering them the most, and visit with them about your confidence and the reason for it. In today's reading Jesus says, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God...because that is why I was sent" (vs.43). It is also why He sends us.

Is your Bible wearing out from use, or is it in storage?

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Luke 4:31-44

1. What effect did Jesus' teaching have on His listeners (vs. 32)? Why did His word have that effect?
2. Jesus' earthly ministry was highlighted by numerous miracles. What miracles are reported in these verses? Why were these miracles important in Jesus' time? Why are these miracles important to us?
3. What did the demons know about Jesus (vs.34, vs.41)? Why wouldn't Jesus allow their public testimony?
4. What do we learn about Peter from vs. 38? Do we know anything else about the families of the disciples?

For Family Reflection

5. Why can we also bring all our diseases and concerns to Jesus (vs. 40)? How does Jesus respond to all our needs?
6. What's your favorite miracle of Jesus? Why do we especially remember Jesus' miracles during this Epiphany season?