

1st Sunday after Epiphany
Baptism of our Lord
January 12, 2025
Pastor Jasper Sellnow



Theme: Christ appeared to save us
Text: **Titus 3:3-7**

³ At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. ⁴ But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

The Word of God we will focus on today is from Paul's letter to Titus, chapter 3. As baptized children of God we pray:

Grant us your Holy Spirit. Help us in our infirmity through Jesus blood and merit. Grant us to grow in grace each day that by this sacrament we may eternal life inherit. Amen. (CW 299 vs. 2)

Last Sunday was the beginning of our observance of a new season of the church year we call *Epiphany*. Epiphany actually began this past Monday, January 6th, just as it has for centuries. 12 days after Christmas... every year... the Christian Church has remembered how the Magi came from a foreign land to worship Jesus who was only a toddler at the time... The church commemorates this part of Jesus' life because it reminds us that Jesus appeared not only with salvation for the Jewish people, but he appeared also for the salvation of the entire world.

The word *appeared*, in fact, is where we get the name for this season. Epiphany is the Greek word that means *appearing*. God appeared to this world in Jesus. God's plan of salvation appeared to this world in Jesus. And this is the good news we celebrate during this season we call *Epiphany*.

Today, on the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we turn our attention to how Christ appeared to save us at baptism... first at his own baptism... and then at your baptism. We'll especially focus on your baptism today, but before we do let's revisit Jesus' baptism so we can better understand why he appeared at the River Jordan and what his baptism has to do with saving us.

You heard in our 1st lesson today how God used a special procedure to mark a chosen king in Old Testament times. When a king was chosen by God, the Lord would send a prophet to anoint him with oil. This anointing was God's way of demonstrating his choice to the people and it symbolized God pouring out his blessing on the man who would serve him as king. This anointing with oil was done for prophets and priests of God in those times also.

Well in the Gospel today we saw Jesus anointed by God... not with oil... but instead as he was baptized with water the Father anointed him with the Holy Spirit... he spoke from heaven... and in doing so he showed his people that this was his chosen prophet... priest... and king... and even more than that... God told the people that this was in fact his Son... the Son with whom he was **“well pleased.”**

So what's the point? Why did Jesus appear at the Jordan and get in line with a bunch of sinners who were being baptized? Well... Christ appeared at his baptism to save you... It was at his baptism that Jesus was washed with water, not to remove his sin, but to mark him as the one God had chosen to remove our sin. This was the public start to Jesus' public ministry... a ministry that would last about three years... starting here at the Jordan River and ending on a cross outside of Jerusalem. God chose Jesus for this work... and anointed him with the Spirit to carry it out. Christ appeared at his baptism to save you... to save me...

And what did he save us from? Well, let's turn now to our sermon text from Titus chapter 3, where Paul writes: **At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another (Titus 3:3).**

You can all probably picture someone who fits this description can't you? Maybe "foolish and disobedient" perfectly describes one of your coworkers... "deceived and enslaved by passions and pleasures" – you maybe have been hurt by a family member whose desires and addictions destroyed your relationship... You've met people who seem to just be "filled with hatred"... who envy others and can't stand when good things happen to them. I'd like you to picture a person you know who fits one of these descriptions... you got it? How many of you are picturing yourself?

You notice Paul doesn't write, "At one time they were foolish..." He says, **"At one time we too were foolish..."** What Paul wants us to see when we read this verse is what we all were at one time. We were foolish and disobedient... we were led astray and enslaved by our lusts and desires. Our identity was evil. We hated others. We hated God. And if we are honest... because of what we were and what we did God hated us.

And we can maybe understand why a holy and perfectly just God would rightly hate those who are evil by nature... and carry out that evil in ways that are shameful to even speak out loud. But what we struggle to understand I would imagine is what we hear next... After reminding us of what we once were Paul goes on to say: **But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us...**

Into a world of malice and envy... a world where people hated one another and hated God... God appeared with kindness and love... literally "love for mankind" is what this word means in the original language. And this is a total paradox of miraculous mercy is it not? Those who should rightly have faced only God's wrath and punishment, God chose to love. And God's love for humanity led him to show kindness to humanity... led him to save humanity... and just to be clear, it was not because humanity had merited saving... Paul writes, **"... he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."**

God chose to rescue us from our foolish and hate-filled lives not because we tried to please him... not because we balanced the scales and made up for our wrongs... Not because he could look into the future and see how good we'd be one day... No... we could never do what was needed, because everything we do is tainted by our sinful nature... as God himself says in the book of Isaiah: **All our righteous acts are like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).**

If we were to be forgiven for our impure actions... cleansed from the filth of our sin... if we were to find a place in God's heaven instead of the hell we deserve... it would not be because of us. It would be because of the compassionate and merciful actions of our gracious God. And Paul goes on to tell us what he did.

He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

You see, Christ appeared to save you... not only at his baptism where he began his march to the cross that he would one day die upon... but Christ appeared to save you at your baptism too... where you were washed of your sins by the Holy Spirit himself... where you were reborn as a holy child of God... where you were given a new heart and a new hope... because you had the justifying grace of Jesus Christ poured out on you... And how could water do something like that? Well... it was certainly not the water that did it... it was God's Word used with the water... it was the Spirit working as he always does through the gospel... through his means of grace... to change hearts and give new spiritual life. That's how this amazing change happened for you.

You know, right around this time of year you'll often find stories of people's amazing weight loss in the news or online. Usually these stories show up this time of year as many people are trying to get into better shape in the New Year. And very often what do you have in those stories? Before and after pictures, right? And alongside the picture you'll find the amazing tale of how this person changed their eating and exercising habits... and how through hard work... and determination they were able to transform their bodies and change their lives.

That kind of physical transformation may be possible if you work hard enough... but please recognize that this is never the case with a spiritual transformation. It's not because of us that we're transformed from the "before picture" of our former way of life defined by our sinful nature to the "after picture" as a child of God with a new self. It's because God's kindness and love appeared in Christ. Christ who went to suffer and die in order to change our "before picture" – a wicked and hated object of God's wrath... into the "after picture" – a person declared to be "not guilty" because of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf... a person who has now been forever united to Christ saving work through our baptism... as Paul tells us elsewhere in Romans 6:

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Romans 6:3-4).

Or as the Apostle Peter wrote: **Baptism saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:21).**

You know, some Christians accuse us Lutherans of teaching that you can be saved apart from Jesus because we teach that baptism saves. But that's simply not the case. Baptism saves only *because* it connects us to the saving work of Jesus Christ. Baptism saves us because God promises that when we are washed with water **in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19)** – as Jesus taught us in Matthew chapter 28 – we are truly washed of our sins... our sinful nature is buried and our souls are resurrected to live before God now as his children and forever in heaven as a part of his family.

At Jesus' baptism, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were all present to attest to the saving work of God which was publicly beginning in this world. At your baptism, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit put their name on you and publicly announce your salvation to this world. Baptism is not simply some church tradition... or symbolic act that we follow... it's not just a family rite of passage... it is the power of God to turn an unbelieving, hell-bound sinner, into a blood-bought, heaven inheriting, child of God. When you witness a baptism you are witnessing nothing less than a resurrection from the dead.

My friends I pray that as we begin this Epiphany season you rejoice in the work Jesus began when he appeared at his baptism work that would end at a cross and empty tomb... and I pray that you rejoice in the work Jesus accomplished for you at your baptism... work that connected you to his cross and empty tomb. I also pray that you find a renewed sense of appreciation for what baptism offers your children. I pray that you find a renewed sense of joy in what your baptism has given you. I hope that every time you wash your hands or take a shower you remember the waters of your baptism... that you remember the washing God did there for you... I hope you remember that you stand forgiven every single day because of it. You don't have to earn back God's love or forgiveness because you fell into sin. You don't have to improve to be accepted by God... you don't have to behave in order to belong... Christ did that for you. And if you ever forget it just remember your baptism... where **you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:11).**

Christ has appeared to save you. At his baptism and at yours. You are God's child. And you get to live a life of service to God now not because you have to, not to save yourself, but because you want to, because you love the Lord who already has perfectly saved you. You can live every day serving God without fear... and knowing that when Christ appears again in glory you will inherit life eternal, just as Paul says at the close of our sermon text, and you'll inherit it not because of what you've done, but because of what your God has done for you. Amen.