

The Baptism of our Lord – New Year, New Me?
Matthew 3:13-17

Pastor Chris Repp
Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“New Year, New Me.” That has apparently become a thing to say at this time of the year. “New Year, New Me.” It captures the perennial optimism that we can redefine ourselves, give ourselves a new identity. I only started noticing this a few years ago, but apparently it’s been out there for some time. I found a blog post from 2015 that was already then complaining about it, and suggesting that we should stop saying it, and stop using it in our social media posts. Nobody needs to know the particulars of your latest diet, the blogger wrote, or of your most recent exercise routine. Go ahead, make New Year’s resolutions, by all means. But spare us the gory details. Well, then, just between you and me, how are *you* doing with your New Year’s resolutions? Or shouldn’t I ask? At our house I think if we have a resolution, it’s to stay the course, at least when it comes to nutrition and exercise. But the new year always gives me, at least, the chance to think about how I might do things better, be more healthy, reinforce my good habits and resist the bad ones.

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord, and at the same time remember our own baptism into Christ. Baptism is an event that marks a transition and establishes an identity. I’m going to have a quick look at all three of our readings this morning, in reverse order, in order to consider the identity-giving meaning first of Jesus’ baptism, then of our own, and finally what they have to do with each other.

First, the account of Jesus’ baptism according to Matthew. Jesus’ baptism in Matthew is established in two ways. The first is the more obvious. As Jesus is coming up out of the water, he sees the Holy Spirit descend on him like a dove, and he hears the voice of God proclaim him the Son of God and the “beloved.” This fits in well with our reading from John on Christmas Day. It defines Jesus as being uniquely connected to God, *the* agent of God’s mission in the world. This is the event that sets the ball rolling and gets Jesus to begin living out his true identity.

Second, Jesus baptism defines how he will interact with us as God’s agent, and even prefigures his crucifixion, if we think about this carefully. Matthew is the only Gospel that has this exchange between Jesus and John the Baptist when Jesus comes for baptism. John doesn’t want to do it. He recognizes himself as unworthy and says that it would be more appropriate for Jesus to baptize *him*. That’s when Jesus says no, that John baptizing *him* “fulfills all righteousness.” What the heck does that mean? It helps to know that “righteousness” can also be translated “justice” here, and that the concept appears in all three of our readings today. John objects to baptizing Jesus because John’s baptism is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John somehow knows that Jesus does not have anything to repent of, and no sin to be forgiven. John is right about this. The “just” or “righteous” thing, by our way of thinking, would be for John to repent and be forgiven by Jesus. But Jesus’ refusal shows that what God is up to in Jesus goes way beyond justice and righteousness. Jesus is unfair to himself in our favor. Already at his baptism Jesus is taking on sins that are not his own in order to save us from the impossible demands of justice. You see now how this foreshadows the cross?

That’s how Jesus’ baptism establishes his identity. So how does our baptism establish ours? That takes us to our second reading. And context is crucial here. This little sermon of Peter’s takes place right after Peter baptizes the centurion Cornelius – a Roman soldier, a Gentile. This event redefines Peter’s understanding of how God operates. He had previously thought that God was only concerned about the people of Israel. His encounter with Cornelius,

together with a vision of God changing the old rules, helps him to realize that God is at work to give all people, both Jews and Gentiles, a new identity in Jesus through baptism. God wants all of us to trust that Jesus' death and resurrection takes away our sin and establishes us as doers of justice. I told you that justice was in all three of our readings. In this one it's lurking under the translation of "right" in verse 35. We who are made acceptable by Jesus' sacrificial death are also transformed into doers of justice, or "doers of the right thing," as a matter of course, as an inevitable consequence of the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' baptism by John and our baptism into Jesus are really two different things, primarily because the baptism that John the Baptist was offering was not baptism into Jesus, or into his death and resurrection. John's baptism was a ritual washing of repentance. It was actually kind of like our new year's resolutions. It marked a person's desire to change, the desire for a "new me" going forward. Jesus used that ritual to show that God was changing things up, which is one of the meanings of the word repentance. I've already talked about that in thinking about our Gospel reading, but our first reading from Isaiah helps flesh it out. And Matthew has Isaiah in mind. Jesus will be the means of establishing God's justice, of making the world right. But he will not do so as a conquering hero, and not as a fire and brimstone prophet, but as one whose life shines with the love and healing of God for all people. He will be resisted and abused, but he will not be broken or extinguished, and he will see God's rescue mission through to the end. That's the promise of Isaiah.

It's also the promise of our baptism and of Matthew's Gospel as a whole. Matthew bookends his Gospel with the promise that God is with us in Jesus Christ, and that, of course, is what we are promised in baptism as well. All of these readings this morning work together to drive that point home. Baptized into Christ Jesus we are given a new identity, *his* identity as God's beloved, and with this comes the security of the promise of God's ongoing presence in our lives. "I am with you always," Jesus promises the disciples at the end of Matthew's Gospel. "I am with you in your teaching and in your baptizing and in your making of disciples." "I am making a new you," God says to each of us in Holy baptism, "and setting you on a new trajectory. I am freeing you from the burden of your past and forgiving you the ultimate consequences of your sinful self-centeredness, so that you can begin living out the promise of *my* kind of justice in place of your own, quietly and persistently conveying my other-centered love, healing, and hope even in the darkest of times."

I hope that I succeed in my vague New Year's resolutions this year of continuing and refining my established routines, and I wish you success in your resolutions as well. But whether we succeed in those personal goals or not, there is already a "new me" and a "new you" in Holy Baptism. God is with us and God is working in us the life of Christ that we share. As we look to the future, whatever it may hold, may God grant us grace to trust the promise of our baptism, to be shaped by our baptismal calling, and to shine with the light of Christ, confident that the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.