



# “This is My Son, the Beloved”: Sermon on the Baptism of Jesus

*The Epiphany of Our Lord (January 6, 1534)*<sup>1</sup>

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Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:13-17)

**T**HE MOST IMPORTANT THING ABOUT TODAY IS THAT CHRIST WAS BAPTIZED.<sup>2</sup> That is a great thing. But you young people must also learn to thank God today for the very first revelation of Christ to the gentiles. [The wise men]<sup>3</sup> were not Jews but foreigners. Nevertheless, [with them] God began to draw to himself a people who were not his people but gentiles. Gentiles were not to give up hope in our Lord God, as though they did not belong to him. So God reveals himself to them now for the first time. The solace in all this for us is that Christ belongs to us. Even though we are not part of his people, we can claim him just as fully as the Jews. [The wise men] had no priests, no worship, no word of God; they were uncircumcised and without temple, churches, or prophets. They come as strangers, as blind men—and they receive the Light that is Christ. They fall on their knees and worship him. They offer him gifts, and he even accepts them. This is our comfort, for which we should thank God today, that we are not repudiated by God’s Son. He accepts the heathen! One could preach a long time about that.

But the second and most important thing about this festival is Christ’s baptism. I wish the day were called “The Baptism of Christ.” At the Jordan, in his thirtieth year, Christ reveals himself fully for the first time. John is shocked by [his

<sup>1</sup>The original text of this sermon (partly in German, partly in Latin) is in WA 37:249-253. The English translation is by Frederick J. Gaiser. A contemporary German version is available in Martin Luther, *Ausgewählte Werke*, vol. 3, *Ausgewählte Predigten* (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1935) 63-70.

<sup>2</sup>The celebration of Epiphany originally drew together the birth of Jesus, the coming of the Magi, Jesus’ baptism, and his first miracle at Cana.

<sup>3</sup>Words in brackets are not in the original text but are provided for clarity in the English version.

desire to be baptized] and says, "Shall I baptize you? I am not worthy." But Jesus responds, "Be content; this is the way it should be." The Son, who is without sin, allows himself to be baptized for our example and our comfort. He does something here that is not required of him, whereas we do nothing that is not required of us. More, we do what is evil. How will we ever get to the point of doing something not required? Christ is holier even than baptism, yet still allows himself to be baptized. Thereby he institutes baptism. So those accursed people who despise or ridicule baptism are banished to the depths of hell. May God blight them and blind them,<sup>4</sup> since they don't have the ears and eyes to see what is going on here. Although *they* do not choose baptism, God's Son does! Are we so arrogant that we should despise baptism? Even if it offered us nothing at all, we should honor baptism simply for Christ's name's sake, and be baptized to honor him. But [something is offered]: God in heaven poured himself out when Christ was baptized.

John indeed saw that the heavens were opened. That was a sign that our Lord God holds baptism dear—baptism that was sanctified by the Son of God himself in his own body. The heavens, previously closed, are now opened, becoming a clear gateway and window for us to see into heaven itself. There is no longer a dividing line between God and us, for he has descended into the [baptismal] water. Isn't this a great revelation? That is why we call [this festival] Epiphany, because God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—has revealed himself with all his angels. The Holy Spirit comes like an innocent dove. Among all birds, the dove is known for its kind heart and lack of anger. Thus, the Holy Spirit presents itself in this friendly form. Here [too] there is no anger. The Son of God, who did not need [to be baptized], reveals himself to us not only as example but also as grace itself. The Father makes himself heard in the voice: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." It would not be surprising if the heavens and the earth shook before this voice, the speaking of our Lord God himself. If our Lord God spoke, I would fall on my face. But, for all that, the voice comes with nothing but kindness, grace, and mercy, saying, "There you have it: One who has been baptized!" So, do you want to know who [our God] is? He does not come with a sword, or with the noisy clamor of Sinai; he comes with nothing but the images and appearance of friendship. The Son is an innocent man who does more than is required of him; the Holy Spirit comes in a friendly form; the Father has a friendly voice: "I am not sending you prophets or apostles or angels; instead you have my Son, with whom I am completely pleased."

So, we are commanded to look to the Son, for God did not shrink from saying to all of us: "Listen, all of you people: This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." What that means is this: "If you want me as a gracious Father, that is quite easy: Hold fast to my Son. Hear and do what he tells you." We should follow this voice through thick and thin.<sup>5</sup> For here our Lord God tears open the heavens and sends the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, [saying] in a sweet voice, "Here

<sup>4</sup>The original German (*das sie Gott schend, blendē*) invites the word play in English.

<sup>5</sup>Luther's idiom is, "One should follow this voice *auf naddelspitzen* (on needle points)."

you have my Son, my heart, my treasure, and all that I am!" Thus, [God] revealed himself today in three forms—the Holy Spirit, the "I" [of the Father], and the Son—but in one divine essence, so that we can know what we should think of Christ. For what Christ says and what he calls us to do is what pleases God; it is the Father's dearest desire. Oh, how blessed we would be if we would only do it, and hold fast to the Son! Are those people not hopeless who pass by such a resounding voice as though they heard nothing? Considering what little respect this shows for [God's] kindness, for his fatherly heart, one would rather die ten times over. At least, that's true for me. So, little children, learn while you can. Formerly, we knew nothing. The heavens were still closed. We had to hear, in the devil's name, what the monks said about purgatory, poltergeists, and the like. But now the indescribable gift of God is being taught so that we can learn it. And if the world remains ungrateful and blind, we at least should thank our Lord God for these benefits. He has revealed to us today his heart and his treasure: the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, the Son in human form, [the Father] himself in a wonderful and lovely voice. So who will not condemn those who are not thankful and happy, and who do not accept the Son with joy? The Son stands in the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descends, the voice of the Father is heard: [God] is as close as the wall [behind me].<sup>6</sup> He shows himself as near as this! And the angels were there too. For wherever the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are revealed, everything else is there as well. Nothing will be left out. Therefore, we should have high regard for this festival. To some degree it is about the wise men. But there is something much, much more important here: the real "three kings" — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

It is extraordinary that such a revelation took place in the baptism at the Jordan. Had God so willed, it could have occurred in the desert or in the temple. But God did not so will. Thus, we should cherish baptism, viewing the baptized as newly made or newly created saints. To be sure, baptism is water. But today some are saying it is "plain water."<sup>7</sup> The devil take them! My dog Tölpel,<sup>8</sup> a wild boar, and a cow know that. But what else is here? Without doubt, in baptism we get God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and all the angels! So, it is no longer "plain water," but water in which the Son of God bathes, over which the Holy Spirit hovers, over which God the Father preaches. That is what baptism is—not when it is simply water, but when the words are added: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." This is still true today. When I baptize "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," then today also are present the Son, who sanctified baptism with his body, the Holy Spirit, who sanctified it with his presence, and the Father, who sanctified it with his voice. When these words are added, there is no more "plain water," but all of heaven is present. Therefore, we should not view baptism as a human work. It is not I that baptize, but God and all the angels—they show up on their own. When we do this

<sup>6</sup>Luther preached this sermon in his home, probably because of illness.

<sup>7</sup>The reference is apparently to the "enthusiasts," who discounted the sacraments and appealed to the inner illumination of the Spirit.

<sup>8</sup>Luther's dog was named Tölpel, or "Blockhead."

work, it is not our doing. Something is added: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Now, who will despise that? Who will call the water of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit "plain water"? Can't we see how God has flavored this water? Add sugar [and other ingredients] to water, and it is no longer just water, but a delicious claret – or something of the sort. So why would you try to separate the word from the water in baptism? Never! The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are in the water; it is the bath water of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the preaching of the Father. This makes it water that takes away sin, death, and every sadness, and helps a person into heaven. Water becomes a precious ointment and medication because God has stirred himself into it. The Father can bring a person to life, and he is in this water. That's why it is the genuine Aquavit.<sup>9</sup>

So we should learn to understand baptism and cherish it, because it contains the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – or even just the name of Christ, as reported in Acts.<sup>10</sup> It is sufficient to be baptized in the name of Christ, because the Father and the Holy Spirit are there [where he is]. So don't separate the water from the word, but say, "The water is ordained by God to make us pure for Christ's sake, for the sake of the Father and the Holy Spirit. They are there in the water to purify us from sin and death." Whoever is in sin, stick them in the baptism[al water], and their sin will be extinguished. Whoever is in death, stick them in the baptism[al water], and death will be swallowed up. For baptism has divine power, the power to break sin and death. That's why we are baptized. If later we fall into error or sin, we have not thereby demolished our baptism; we return to it, and say, "God has baptized me, plunged me into the baptism[al water] of his Son, of the Father and the Holy Spirit. There I return, and I trust that my baptism will take away my sin – not for my sake, but for the sake of the man Christ, who instituted it."

This far surpasses the revelation with the three kings. It is the true [Epiphany] festival. Under the papacy, it is celebrated for eight days, but they mistake the little things for the big things. To be proper, the festival should take its name from the baptism and be called, "The Day of Christ's Baptism." That would give us occasion to preach about baptism against the enthusiasts and the devil. The devil lets us see everything except our real treasure; from that he wants to separate us!

So, we learn how the Father revealed himself on this day with a fine sermon about his Son. [We learn that] what he does with us and we with him is well pleasing to God, that whoever follows the Son becomes God's beloved child. God also revealed the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. And our Lord God poured himself out with all his kindness and grace. "Here you have the Son," says God, "not an angel, but the Son; and you have me as well." God can offer no higher revelation. When he himself preaches, he can find no greater minister. Any who do not believe this should be led away by the devil. They do not deserve to hear it. ☩

<sup>9</sup>Luther: "*aqua vitae*." Aqua vitae (or Aquavit), the water of life, was, even in Luther's day, a common term for distilled spirits (so Martin Luther, *Ausgewählte Werke*, 3:78).

<sup>10</sup>E. g., Acts 2:38, etc.