

“To Fulfill All Righteousness”

In the past year, 11 children were brought to this font to be baptized. Each one had water sprinkled or poured from the little bowl inside onto their foreheads and heard the words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Some cried, some slept, and some watched with wide eyes everything that was going on all around them. Some were old enough that they may even remember what happened. And for each one, God used this baptism as a powerful means of grace. Through it he washed away their sins and he created or strengthened faith in their hearts.

There were no adults baptized at this font in the past year. We’d have to go back a bit farther for that, though many adults have been baptized here over the years. And as we start to think back on the many years of history for this baptismal font, it is amazing to consider the activity that it has seen. For many years we no doubt have very precise records, though it is possible that in some cases we do not. And while it’s not important whether or not we know the exact number of men, women, and children who were baptized at this font, we know that every single one of them had some important things in common. Each one was a sinner who needed the forgiveness of sins which God offers through baptism. Each one received a powerful washing, not of dirt from their bodies, but of the forgiveness of sins.

Walk with me now to a very different place. It is another place where people are being baptized. We don’t know exact numbers. We don’t know their ages. This place is the shore of the Jordan River as it winds through the wilderness of Judea. A man named John is responsible for what is going on here. He preaches to the people. He tells them to repent. He points out their sins. He tells them to change their lives and that the kingdom of heaven is near. And those who believe are baptized. We can watch as one by one they walk into the water. One by one John baptizes them, and one by one they come back out from the water. No matter how long we watch, we know that each and every one in this long line of people is a sinner, just like every person who came to our baptismal font and just like every one of us worshipping here today.

Well, not quite. Today we watch as something unique happens. Today we see John stop and look to one man and try to argue with him. John tries to send him away. This man is different. This man didn’t need to hear John’s message. He was John’s message. This man doesn’t need to be baptized. He’s going to baptize people with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This man stands apart from every other man, woman, and child ever to have walked on the face of the earth. They all are sinners. This man alone has no sin. Scripture has allowed us to listen in. John knows that Jesus has no sin. John knows that everyone else does. He knows that he does. He’s confused. He’s troubled. **“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”** he says.

But Jesus did not come to confuse or to trouble. About Jesus it had been written, **“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out”** (Isaiah 42:3). He was there to help those whose consciences were rightly troubled. He was the long-promised servant of God. And he was doing the work that God had given him to do. **Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.”**

We’ll go back again to see the scene unfold there at the Jordan River. But let’s pause for a moment to consider Jesus’ words. “This is what should be done,” he said. “This is proper for us to do, to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus didn’t deny what John said. John was right that Jesus didn’t need baptism. He was right that Jesus had no sin. What John needed Jesus to tell him was that there was more to it. What Jesus was doing was to fulfill all righteousness.

Righteousness is a word that is used frequently in Scripture, and it is used in a few different ways. It has to do with right or proper conduct. God is righteous in and of himself, and he demands righteousness from his people. In order for us to have a relationship with God, we have to have righteousness. And if our

conduct is lacking in any way, if we have fallen short of God's demands, then God's righteousness properly condemns us.

And while there is much that we could say about Christ's work, and much that we could say about righteousness, Jesus' words here offer us a good summary of Jesus' work. Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness. It started with his birth as a true human being. Though we hear little about it in Scripture, in his youth and young adulthood, Jesus continued to live a perfect life on our behalf. He was fulfilling righteousness by being righteous. He was always obeying God's law.

And yet he came to be baptized, not as a sinner, but in place of sinners. With his baptism, Jesus was identifying himself with the sinners that he came to save. And just as many of them were coming to John, appropriately, for baptism, so Jesus also would be baptized. Jesus was baptized for our righteousness. The waters of his baptism were for the sake of our sins. While we are amazed and wonder along with John why Jesus would need to stoop down to submit to John's baptism, we also need to along with John admit our unworthiness. I need this, Jesus. I need forgiveness, not you. I need righteousness. You have it already. When Jesus says that it was done to fulfill all righteousness, he is saying that it was for you. Jesus replied to John, John consented, and Jesus was baptized.

Let's go back to the river to see what happens next. As Jesus walks up out of the water and onto the shore, down comes the Holy Spirit, as heaven opened before him. Like a dove the Holy Spirit descended and came upon Jesus. Remember how Peter described it—**“God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power.”** In a very real way this was an anointing. This was a public proclamation that Jesus was the one that God had chosen. Jesus was the one that had been promised. Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ. And the Holy Spirit would be with him to strengthen him for his journey and his work.

As we've discussed, Jesus was already doing his work. He was already living the perfect life that we failed to live, but his baptism marked a transition point. From this point forward, his ministry would be carried out in a different, public way. He would gather disciples around him, he would preach to large crowds and teach them. By doing so he would upset the religious and political leaders of his day. And he would ultimately allow them to arrest him and put him to death. During the rest of the Epiphany season, we will hear much about Jesus' public ministry, his teaching and preaching. But ultimately this work will lead to that final goal, Christ's death for our sins and for the sins of the world. His purpose is to fulfill all righteousness.

And as we head back to the river one more time, we hear something special. From the heavens that opened up to reveal the Holy Spirit now comes the voice of the Father. **“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”** And so much of what we have already said and so many important truths are contained in that brief sentence. As Jesus was identifying himself with sinners, God was identifying him as our Savior.

He is the Son, God himself. Our God is mysterious and beyond our understanding. He is three in one in a way that we could never fully comprehend. And there at the Jordan's bank, we see and hear it. God the Father speaks. God the Son stands on the shore following his baptism. God the Holy Spirit lights on him as a dove. None is greater than the others, except that Jesus has humbled himself to be with us. All are true God. All are working to accomplish our salvation.

And the Father's voice alerts us to the fact that Jesus is doing what he set out to accomplish. He says, **“with him I am well pleased.”** His perfect life has no stain or blemish. The work he is undertaking is in line with the Father's will and his good and gracious plan for us. The death that he is going to die will satisfy God's wrath against a world of sinners. All righteousness would be fulfilled.

And that is why we celebrate a day focused on the Baptism of our Lord. We gain comfort and strength in considering what that event means for us. It means that even though we and countless others came to a baptismal font like this one as sinners, we went away from it righteous. Though he didn't need it, Jesus was baptized for us. Though we didn't deserve it, he has given salvation to us.

The Text: Matthew 3:13–17 (NIV84)

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

¹⁵ Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”