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Baptism of Our Lord

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Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

This morning we're going to talk about Jesus' baptism and what his baptism means for us, how we share his baptism, what characteristics of Jesus' baptism that we share in our own baptisms.

First I need to fill in some important details because our reading is considered high-context literature, which omits many of the important details that the original readers would have understood and filled in for themselves. This is in contrast to low-context literature where no details are left out, like legal documents or contracts.

So in writing this high-context account today of Jesus' baptism, Mark expects his first century audience to supply their very distinctive cultural understandings of, for example, kinship, including eternity. So, let's start with kinship.

Jesus leaves his family and goes out to be with John to be baptized. This decision is very symbolic. In Jesus' day family is one of the central social institutions and, apart from family, there was no identity or meaning. There was no such thing as "I," only "we." So Mark's original readers would not miss the significance of Jesus' symbolic break with his family ties, and they would wonder, 'what is He going to do now?' This is not to sound melodramatic; a person not embedded in his family is considered as good as dead.

The circumstances of the baptism of Jesus provide a quick and clear answer to this predicament that Jesus is in – that he's left his family group. A voice emanating from the torn-apart heavens declares that Jesus is the Son of God, beloved of, and highly pleasing to God the Father. You know, in Jesus' day they had a primitive understanding of reproduction and it was impossible to prove who a father actually was. For this reason, the practice was that a man or father would acknowledge a baby as his own. This is my boy or this is my girl. You would claim that child and bring them into the family.

So, for example, this is what Joseph did when he agrees to marry Mary who is not pregnant by him. He performs exactly this 'claiming', bringing into his family, to help Jesus. Joseph accepted Jesus as his own son, bringing him into the family, giving Jesus an honorable standing and secure setting in which to live.

But Jesus has symbolically left this all behind -- this family, this security -- and no sooner has he done that, then none other than God personally acknowledges him as his beloved and obedient

son. But there's still one difficulty remaining. As we've talked about before, honor, the most important thing to the people in Jesus' day, is a public proclamation of worth, accompanied by the public acknowledgment of that worth. The heavens are torn apart. This indicates that it's a public event. If not for that fact, this experience that Jesus had would be quite personal and, in his society, meaningless.

However, when we look closer at the text, it's interesting to note that Mark does not mention any crowds or witnesses there. So, who else hears this statement? Who will acknowledge and confirm this public claim to the honorable status of Jesus? The answer is – the original readers and hearers, the faithful for the last two thousand years, and you and me.

This is where we come in. Mark expects those of us who hear and read the Gospel to recognize the source of Jesus' honor and provide the confirmation that's required. You and I are expected to recognize Jesus as the pleasing Son of God. "You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

So now that we understand a little more about the cultural significance of Jesus' baptism, and the importance of him being called God's Son, God's beloved, I'd like us to think for a moment about what it means to say that Christians are baptized

into Christ's baptism. I want to examine three characteristics of Jesus' baptism; three characteristics that we share with Jesus in our own baptisms.

Let's first look at what baptism John was proclaiming – baptism of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. But before we go on, we have to ask the question, 'if it's for the repentance of sins, then why did Jesus, who is sinless, need to be baptized in the first place?' But when we look at his character, and his ministry that follows, his baptism is simply in line with his character. It's congruent with his whole ministry. That he came, not as a domineering Lord, but as a servant who stands in solidarity with the poor and the outcast, and those most in need of forgiveness and purification.

So, in baptism, we declare the forgiveness of sins, which is rooted in the washing with the water that took place in the Jordan, and takes place for each of us in the Word and the water that echoes that holy river.

For us the water symbolizes cleanliness, being purified from the stain of sin. We believe that, not only the forgiveness of sins that we receive, but also the repentance that's necessary for forgiveness are gifts from, and the work of, God. We receive these gifts. It's impossible for us to achieve this by ourselves, even this repentance, let alone the forgiveness that God gives us.

So baptism in its entirety is a gift from God. What happens next? The Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in his baptism and so, too, the Holy Spirit descends on Christians today at their baptisms. For Jesus' baptism serves as the definitive pronouncement of his true identity, a divine revelation of his relationship with God, and the inauguration of his ministry; both with water and the Holy Spirit are integral parts of that pronouncement. And, as with Jesus in our baptisms, we find our

true identity. We are claimed by Christ forever, and permanently sealed with the cross of Christ on our forehead. In our baptisms we are given the name of Child of God, and we also receive our vocation to live out, in some form, a faithful ministry in the world.

The last connection I would like to lift up between Jesus' baptism and our own baptism is that we, too, are called beloved. The divine voice proclaims Jesus precious to his Father. At our baptisms Jesus speaks a word of love to us, proclaiming that we, too, are ones with whom God takes pleasure, ones with whom God is well pleased. This is a creative act of God, one that echoes the account of the creation story found in Genesis 1. There, after each day of creation, God surveys what God has created and says it is good. You are good because God made you. So, in our baptisms, God proclaims us beloved, and, like the other aspects of baptism that I lifted up, the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit, this new name is permanent; it's inscribed on our hearts. And, the Good News is that we are connected to God by the unbreakable bond of divine love.

So we baptize today, not only because Jesus commanded us to do it, but because, in our baptisms, we share his gifts, we bear his name, and we conform our lives to his. Amen.