

Sermon for January 12, 2020 – “Behold!”

Baptism of Our Lord, Year A – Text(s): Matthew 3:3-17

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Behold is a great word. It captures an announcement, observation, and inquiry. It’s kind of “old-school.” It has kind of a regal flair to it. Still, it would sound weird if I introduced Jane with “behold, my wife!” Imagine what it might be like if I introduced something at a Session meeting with “Behold, I have a great idea for us to consider!”

“Behold” announces and invites a crowd. When John the Baptist sees Jesus there on the banks of the River Jordan he proclaimed “**Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**” We hear it in our gospel reading this morning, “**...and behold a voice from heaven said This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.**”

“Behold” is usually reserved for big events, important moments, and important announcements. The baptism of Jesus is that kind of event. The three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) record the baptism of Jesus and even John makes reference to elements of it which is an unusual level of harmony especially when you consider that even Jesus’ birth doesn’t appear in all four of the Gospels. Events that are listed with **that** degree of harmony are extremely important. They include Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, crucifixion, and of course, His resurrection. In other words events that make it into all four gospels are **beyond** important. They’re crucial. Now, I get why Jesus’ arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection are important. I’m willing to bet that most of us do. But why His baptism? Why is that so important? What was its purpose? Inquiring minds want to know! I mean, was He repenting like the other Jews? Was He preparing Himself like they were for the coming of the kingdom?

How is the baptism of Jesus related to a regular baptism? To **our** baptism? Are they the same? How are they different? These are the questions that surface when we start looking at Jesus’ baptism with more than a passing glance. Again, that it’s important is obvious – but why? That’s what I want to look at this morning. Let me approach the question this way: What do we “behold” in the baptism of Jesus?

Well, there are three things. The first is actually kind of obvious and it’s that Jesus doesn’t fit John’s baptism. Essentially, John the Baptist’s ministry was all about preparing people for the coming of the Messiah. He preached repentance and baptism was symbolic of that on the part of the person being baptized. Our reading tells us that Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan for the specific purpose of being baptized by him. This was quite a way to travel, about 70 miles. In other words, Jesus wasn’t just passing through this area. This right there tells us something of the importance of what was going on here. But when He gets there the text says, “**John would have prevented Him...**” The word “prevent” is a strong word that indicates an attempt to forbid, to stop or to refuse. It’s like when we say, “Don’t even think about it” “No way!” Or my favorite – “Aw heck, no!” And John’s reasoning here is very clear, he doesn’t believe that he’s **worthy** to baptize Jesus. Jesus is greater than John.

John himself says, “I need to be baptized by You and do You come to me?” John knows that Jesus is sinless and doesn’t need to repent. So it’s understandable why John would resist this. It’s strange and more than just a little. John relents, which I’ll talk about in a bit. So, the question remains, Why then IS Jesus asking to be baptized?

Well, two reasons and these are the other two things that we’re to “behold” here. Two words, **Inauguration** and **Identification**. Now, when you hear the word “inauguration” you usually think of a presidential inauguration. Not a word you hear that often, every four years or so. As most of us know, an inauguration is formal ceremony, a process by which someone takes over an office or a certain position. But what makes this really interesting, especially in the context of talking about Jesus’ baptism as an inauguration, is that the historical source of the word “inauguration” stems from the Latin word “augur” which refers to the rituals of ancient Roman priests seeking to interpret if it was the will of the gods for a public official to be deemed worthy to assume office. There’s a bit of that going on here. You’ll recall that the text tells us that as He came out of the water the heavens were opened to Him. This is more than just a record of what happened, it’s a significant statement about Jesus and His ministry. The opening of heaven means that God is about to speak and indicates that what’s happening is by Divine design. God is going to speak inaugurating the ministry of His son.

Ezekiel 1 records an interesting parallel here that while Ezekiel was at the river Chebar “**...the heavens opened, and [he] saw visions of God.**” When the vision’s over Ezekiel is thus empowered by the Holy Spirit for his prophetic ministry. The same kind of thing is happening as Jesus is being baptized but before God speaks, something else happens; the Spirit of God descended like a dove. It came and rested upon Him. Looking at the different gospel accounts of John’s baptism of Jesus they all have differences. But the one thing **everyone** mentions is the coming of the Spirit upon Jesus. Obviously, it’s important. The question is: why? Well, throughout the Bible the coming the Spirit in this way was a clear picture of the prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah. Spirit-empowerment was the defining characteristic of the chosen servant of God. The presence of the Spirit identifies Jesus as the Spirit-empowered Messiah, a clear statement of divine endorsement and anointing.

But there is more – God speaks. We hear, “And behold, a voice from heaven said “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” This is a beautiful scene. It’s loaded with meaning and offers a clear picture of the Trinity. This picture briefly put: The Father decrees. The Son obeys. The Spirit empowers.

So, again, Jesus’ baptism isn’t about repentance, it’s about the inauguration of His ministry. It is the moment in Jesus’ life where He is

- Identified as the Son of God.
- Empowered by the Spirit.
- Loved by the Father.

The preparation was over. The Messiah had come. The long-awaited Messiah affirmed by the Father and empowered by the Spirit was here.

This brings us to the third things we're to "behold" and that is, as I said, identification. And simply put is that in His baptism Jesus identifies with us so that we might identify with Him. I've saved this for last because I think it's the most **meaningful** thing at a personal level. Also, because I think it's the most important thing to "behold."

Earlier, I mentioned John's reluctance to baptize Jesus. I didn't mention Jesus' response which is something lots of people have wondered about probably since the very moment the words were uttered. Jesus' response to John was "**Let it be so now for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.**" In a way, it's kind of telling in that there was something going on here, something important that perhaps went beyond John's understanding. In other words Jesus is telling John that He needs to be baptized for reasons other than why John normally baptizes people. It has to do with **fulfillment**. Jesus' motivation for being baptized was so that He could fulfill all righteousness. Let me explain. No, there is too much, let me sum up.

In being baptized Jesus is doing something He is supposed to do, an act of **obedience**. Jesus is embracing an act of obedience that God expects of His people even though it didn't pertain to Him. In other words, He was doing something that He didn't need to do and that action was part and parcel of accomplishing righteousness. This is the essence of Jesus' mission to identify with God's people so that righteousness can be fulfilled. Righteousness being defined here as being in right relationship with God or to state it like I did in point three, to identify with us so that we might identify with Him. This theme of Christ identifying with human beings so that they can identify with Him is all over the Bible. What a stunning thought this is! The Son of God identifies Himself with humanity so that human beings could be identified with Him. He becomes sin so that we could be righteous. And Jesus' baptism is the announcement of this ministry. So John's baptism, the baptism of Jesus and believer's baptism, are all different. **John's** baptism prepared people for the coming of the Messiah. John's baptism of **Jesus** was about Jesus identifying with mankind. **Our** baptism, to put it briefly, is our identification with Jesus.

So think about that for a moment! This is the essence of the gospel that Christ came to bear our penalty for sin so that you could receive forgiveness and His righteousness. Again, righteousness with respect to our relationship with God. He identified with us so that we could identify with Him. He became sin so that we might be reconciled with God, reconnected to God, and back in relationship with God. It means that we identify **His** death as **our** death and His resurrection as our resurrection!

So what do we "behold" in the baptism of Jesus? We see that His unnecessary entrance into the waters of John's baptism was meant to show how far, how low, and how deep He would go to make people clean. We see the power of the Spirit, the humility of Christ, and the depth of the love of Father.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.