

BAPTISM OF OUR LORD  
JANUARY 9/12/13, 2019

FIRST LUTHERAN, MARSHALL  
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Psalm 2:7-8; Matthew 3:1-17

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*



One Christmas when our children were very young, they received a beautiful and silly present from my mother. It was a coloring book filled with crazy scenes of things that could never happen in real life, a lot like the one you see on the screens.

In our kids' book, a **barnyard setting** appeared normal until a closer look revealed:

- a lamb with wings,
- a pig sipping tea,
- a rooster with one horse's hoof, and
- a cow perched high in a tree.

Appropriately, the book was entitled, What's Wrong with this Picture?

We're told in today's Gospel lesson that John the Baptizer had a similar sort of sensation when Jesus came to **him** to be baptized. John felt that something was terribly wrong with the notion of Jesus stepping into the water with all the other people who were being baptized for the repentance of their sins.



As you heard earlier, John had said to his followers,

*<sup>11</sup> “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

John was calling people to cleanse themselves with a ritual bath and to dedicate themselves to living by God’s Word. Yet he knew that the Messiah would “baptize” people in the power of God’s Spirit, and fill them with the gift of faith.

“Something’s *wrong with this picture*” said John to the man from Nazareth. *You should be baptizing me!!* But Jesus insisted, saying, *No, this is right. It’s meant to be this way.*

And when he’d been baptized, coming up out of the water, we’re told that the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God alighting on him in the form of a dove. And then God’s voice shook the heavens, saying, *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*

Thus begins the story of Jesus’ ministry, the story of God’s YES! to the Lord’s willingness to walk **our** way through life, to follow in **our** halting footsteps, to tread that rough and rocky path *from birth, through life, to death*... even death on a cross. What began with Jesus’ birth is now affirmed in his baptism.

Yet even so, when we look around us at the world in which we live, we’re often left asking that very question: *What’s wrong with this picture?* A New Year begins, a future appears pregnant with possibilities...but the headlines of our news-programs/papers/or posts are filled with the same old things.

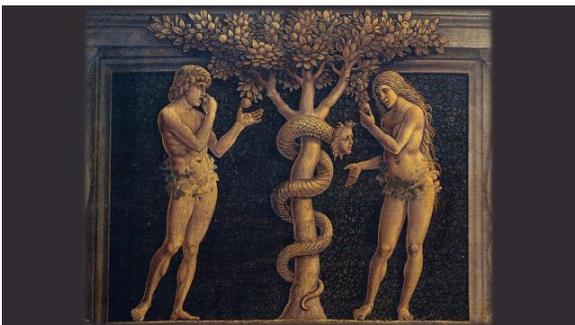


We hear about child abusers and drug users,  
 about people fighting and dying in Syria and Africa,  
 about a congress that seeks only to blame,  
 about the self-serving lives of people of fame...  
 and very little hope for the blind, poor and lame...

And while many people **claim** to know what's wrong with this picture, few of us are eager to see ourselves as part of the problem. M. Scott Peck, and Karl Menninger before him, were psychologists who offered something new to this discussion of guilt and blame by speaking of something old. They argued that any assessment of our problems will be accurate only if we include in such discussions the topic of sin and personal responsibility.

But, truth be told, that's not a popular approach these days – we're much more inclined to protect ourselves at all costs, even if it means stretching the truth.

And yet – this is nothing new, either – right? In the third chapter of Genesis we find the story of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God blesses Adam and Eve with everything they need: physically, emotionally and spiritually.



Then the Lord also sets a challenge in front of them – the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and says, *Don't eat the fruit of this tree...because it will kill you.* You know the story – the serpent tempts them, they give in, they reject God's command, and eat.

**Remember what happened when they were confronted with their sin?**

Well, to their credit, they did **not blame** their problems on cruel parents or a rotten childhood (of course, they didn't HAVE parents or any kind of childhood!). But they **also** did *not* stand up and say, *I'm guilty. I knew the rules and I broke them. Punish me as you will*

Instead, Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent, and so it goes today...except in very rare circumstances...

A friend of ours used to be a District Attorney in rural Alaska. She said she quickly discovered that the local jails were disproportionately filled with Native Alaskans. The problem, she said, was that when a white person was accused of a crime, they'd deny it and hire a lawyer. When a Native person was accused...they'd tell the truth...and get sent to jail.

But identifying the problem is at most only half the battle. Knowing the symptoms of a disease does not necessarily mean that the patient can be healed. So, though we may indeed know *what's wrong with the picture* of human sin, the truth is that we're at a loss as to know what we can do about it.

On the one hand, that's bad news because no one likes to feel helpless in the face of a problem. On the other hand, and in a strange sort of way, it really is good news for us. For if it were up to us to fix humanity, to cure the disease of sin, to heal the break that separates heaven and earth, then we'd all be in very big trouble. History shows that we'd either blame each other or pick a scapegoat and come up with some demonic *final solution* to rid the world of that *evil* scourge

But in a weird sort of way, that's really ok, because the truth of the Gospel is that God has already done everything that's required. In the mystery of Jesus' baptism for the repentance of sins, we see the wonderful workings of God's gift of grace.



For here Jesus comes and stands in our place, asking God to forgive the sins of the world as if they were his own.

Jesus' acceptance of John's baptism was his own YES! to all that would follow: the love and the cheers, the laughter and tears, the insults and jeers of those who caused his suffering and death, of those who continue to cause suffering and death to God's children.

It was his YES! to God's love for ALL PEOPLE. In Jesus' willingness to live, and love, and suffer, and die – he lovingly brought to our world God's great gift of forgiveness, love and grace. No wonder God was moved to say, ***This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased!***

And even more than that, in a scene that seems incredibly absurd, like a cartoon with the caption, ***What's wrong with this picture?***, our God speaks those very same words to the world...about you and me. By virtue of our baptism into Christ, you and I are loved by God in the very same way. Daily God presents us to life and says, **These are my sons, these are my daughters, my beloved ones...with whom I am well pleased!**

What a wonderful invitation for us to live our lives in a way that's deserving of God's praise: sharing with others the good news of this amazing gift of grace.

And there's absolutely NOTHING wrong with that picture, is there? Thanks be to God!

Amen.