

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church

The Hidden Glory of Baptism

Mark 1:4-11

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

In the Lutheran Church every baptism is a celebration. And with good reason! Scripture says "[God] save[s] us through [this] washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit ... so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:5,7). So, whenever there's a baptism here at Christ Our Savior, there's always lots of smiles. Smiles on the faces of the pastors, the parents, the congregation, the extended family and friends who were invited to the special occasion ... even smiles on the face of God!

How different then, was Jesus' baptism as described in today's Holy Gospel. It sounded like virtually no one was there to smile – not Mary, not Joseph, no shepherds, no angels, no godparents, no grandma and grandpa ... no one. Just Jesus and John the Baptist, all alone somewhere along the Jordan on the edge of wilderness.

But what glory was there in that place where the lowliest of the low baptized the highest of the high, the King of kings and Lord of lords. There the Trinity showed itself as God the Holy Spirit covered and filled the humble human nature of God the Son, and a beaming God the Father declared himself to be in favor of all that Mary's son – his own Son – is and all the work he is about to do over the next three years. The glory was so great at Jesus' baptism that it tore heaven open!

But no one was there to see it ... no one knew ... except John the Baptist and now us, to whom God has chosen to reveal it in his Word and in our own baptisms. For here, too, is glory. In your baptism the glory of the Trinity is just as present and just as hidden as it was back then. Especially when we realize it is no less than the Holy Spirit of God which descends from heaven to cover you and to dwell in you by water and the Word. It is no one other than the Son of God, himself, who presents you to his heavenly Father as another one for whom he did salvation's work of living a truly righteous life for you and dying a totally innocent in your place and rising triumphant from the grave, so that you one day can too. Because of what the Son did for you, the Father smiles on you. But more than that, he has "justified [you] by his grace" (Tit 3:7) so that in your baptism he is proud to say he is well pleased with you too. Is there a more truly glorious moment in a Christian's life? And yet, other than a few splashes of water on our infant heads, you wouldn't know it to look at us. Why it's almost a secret, hidden away from so many who don't give God and his glory a second thought.

As I've been gathering my thoughts for this sermon, I can't escape wondering why that is. Why is it that God chooses to work this way in our baptisms and in his Son's? Or for that matter, in our lives and in this world. It almost seems like he prefers to hide his glory. Or at least, the greater the glory the harder he makes it be noticed.

The glories of Jesus baptism being manifest in wilderness isolation is but one example. Think of the glory of taking humanity into God, the glory of the Incarnation we talked about on Christmas morning. It was hidden away in a virgin's womb to be born, not even the first baby of the New Year, but born outback in a barn, unnoticed by all expect some shepherds. Think about how God chooses to show his glory during Jesus' upbringing. He puts into the scriptural record not some out of this world GPA nor tales of his "Connecting with community" while a child in Nazareth. Instead the Bible tells us his parents were scrupulous in their observance of the Law of Moses (Lk 2:21,39,41). That he was obedient to his parents (Lk 3:51) and their pious example rubbed off on him (Luke 3:41; 4:15-16). Not exactly the stuff that gets one noticed by the admissions officers of your more selective universities.

And once he got going in his ministry after his baptism, today's First Lesson reminded us of how in Israel it more often looked an exercise in futility than the coming of the glory of the Lord (Is 49:4).

Like I said, the greater the glory, the more hidden its manifestation.

The pattern holds in the life of the Christian. We've already mentioned what it's like at perhaps the most glorious moment of our lives, the moment of our baptisms. What about the glory of a life striving to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind; and thus love our neighbors as ourselves? It's not exactly obvious. In fact, lives lived like this in the competitive, "look at me" environments found in many of our schools and workplaces are usually overlooked or mistaken for being weak.

Are you familiar with virtue signaling? Even if you've never heard the term, you've certainly experienced it. It's what an automaker is doing in its commercials about an environmentally concerned couple giving their grandparents a dining room table made out a tree they so reluctantly took down because grandma and grandpa had carved their initials carved into it years ago when they fell in love. No mention of the cars they make or how they drive. No price incentives. Just signaling that as a corporation they're virtuous and implying that those who drive their cars are good, generous people who are sweetly sentimental and environmentally conscious too.

Virtue signaling is the conspicuous expression of values done to enhance ones standing within a certain group. Corporations do it to their customers now days because it sells. Politicians do it to voters because it gets votes. Businesses do it to protect themselves against consumer backlash. And we do it because it makes us look good in the eyes of those we'd like to impress. What do you think's behind a lot of the selfies I post and likes I like and hashtags I hash!?! Look at all my little glories!

But the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ is far greater than anything I can generate on my own. It is so great that it doesn't signal well when one tries to use it to enhance their own standing in the eyes of others. "Look at me, I'm a Christian." "Look at me, I went to church today." "I've got it all together. Everything in my life's great!" "Hashtag love Jesus." Society disdainfully considers such signals as coming from zealots or Bible-thumpers. Those in the church have long thought such self-glorifying piousness to signal Phariseism or hypocrisy.

That the glories of Jesus' baptism were for the most part hidden should tell us that God the Father didn't send his Son to be famous, and that God the Holy Spirit didn't come on him to make him a superstar in our eyes or the eyes of anyone else. He was here to be his humble servant, the Savior. Which meant his greatest glory would be the hardest of all to see, for it wouldn't come until he was beaten and bloodied and nailed to a Roman cross under the weight of the world's sin. Only those who believe what the Bible says about that moment can see the glory of it, the glory of God's salvation.

Earlier I explained that our baptism might well be the most glorious moment of our lives even though all that the triune God is doing for us in the sacrament is mostly hidden in it. I pray that the eyes of your faith, which God's Word has further focused today, would see it the same way. So, if baptism is our most glorious moment, what might eclipse it? Wouldn't it be the moment of our deaths? Remember how God works. The greater the glory, the harder it is to see. And it is hard to see through eyes of tears at the deathbed of a loved one, even a Christian loved one. But it's really there, because Jesus your Savior is really there to take you by the hand into our heavenly Father's glorious presence! What a moment that will be!

In the meantime, let us daily live in the glory of Christ's baptism and ours by faith, even if we can't yet see the Father's smiling face.

Amen.

Prayers of the Church

P: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you reveal your glory in the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Through it you've worked in the hearts and lives of your people, and even do so now as we have spent this hour pondering the ways you manifest your glory among us. Build in us such faith that we get into the habit of daily reliving our baptisms by repenting of our sins and turning to you for your gracious, free forgiveness.

Bless all parents here today that they would continue to joyfully meet the responsibilities of raising their baptized children in the Faith. Move those who are sponsors or godparents to more regularly remember their godchildren in their prayers to you and to encourage them in the faith by word and example.

Bless this church that it would continue to provide excellent Christian education to its children. Move all our parents to take full advantage of what their church offers. Most of all, continue make this a place where heaven is opened to sinners by the glory of your grace in the person and saving work of Jesus Christ our Savior

Especially we ask your blessing upon those baptized this past year in this congregation:

Edwin Chester Harris V

Waylon Christopher Porter

Caleb Theodor Hampton

Ezra John Eggert

Easton Mark Vollmer

Brielle Elizabeth Moore

Connor Michael Szczepanski

Julian Joseph Carlton Tafelsky

Asher Stanley Mulica *Mul-EYE-ka*

Annalise Rose Franzo

Corianna Elizabeth Pomarius *Pa-MARY-us*

Prayer Requests

**All: Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**