

# Baptism of Our Lord, Epiphany, Gospel Year A

## God's Decision in Baptism

**Matthew 3:13-17**

**Baptism of Our Lord**

**Analysis by Brad Haugen**

*13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*



## **DIAGNOSIS: The Death of Baptism**

### ***Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Reduced to a Rite of Passage***

As the Oxford Dictionary defines it, a rite of passage is “a ceremony or event marking an important stage in someone’s life, especially birth, puberty, marriage, and death.” Certain milestone birthdays, wedding anniversaries, having children, graduations, the beginning or change of a career, and retirement are also considered rites of passage. For fewer and fewer of us, the congregation where we were baptized is also the congregation where we were confirmed and married. Only occasionally do we hold funerals for people who were baptized, confirmed, married, and buried all at the same congregation.

In this way, baptism is conveyed as one of many rites of passage along life’s way. As we tell our life stories, baptism—if it is

mentioned at all—is reduced to the same level as all the other rites of passage. As such, baptism commonly signifies little more than our belonging and commitment (and our family's belonging and commitment) to a church.

### ***Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): We Don't Get to Decide***

John at the Jordan wanted to be baptized by Jesus. "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John told Jesus. John himself admitted that he baptized with water, but the One coming after him, the One whose way he was preparing, would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John believed that he was not worthy to untie or carry the Messiah's sandals.

John believes, for very good reasons, that Jesus should be baptizing him. However, at the baptism of our Lord, John does not get to decide what happens. John does not get to define what baptism is. Our families, or we ourselves, depending on our age, still have our reasons for deciding to be baptized. Those reasons can range from our families wanting us to have salvation, to our parents' desire to make our grandparents happy.

Nevertheless, as it was for John, the decision of what happens in baptism is taken out of our hands. Jesus simply commanded John to baptize him, even though John would have preferred it the other way around. And what happened in Jesus' baptism was clearly beyond John's control. Likewise, we don't get to decide what happens to us in baptism. We may think we are the ones in control as we have our own motivations, but we don't get to decide what happens.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Drowned in Unrighteousness**

We actually go to our deaths trying to control what God should do to us in baptism. We would like to think that our baptism can, for us, “fulfill all righteousness,” as Jesus is saying here. But we misunderstand what Jesus means by this.

Our baptism doesn't somehow earn us God's love and acceptance. Instead, the Father of Jesus Christ, through the power of their Spirit, drowns us in the water of our baptism. Our life is out of our hands.

We are actually unrighteous as we desire to take what is God's in order to be righteous. Our baptism, like everything else when it comes to God, becomes a self-righteous attempt to get what we want from God. But this, God will not have. He drowns us in our baptism; the drowning is God's decision. We are dead. We are drowned in unrighteousness, nowhere near “fulfilling all righteousness” as Jesus promised when he was baptized.

## **PROGNOSIS: The New Life of Baptism**

***Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Named, Claimed, and Made Righteous***



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ism, we don't get to decide what happens next. But Jesus does. For Jesus, "to fulfill all righteousness" means not only his righteousness with his Father in the Spirit, but our righteousness with his Father in the Spirit as well. Thus, Jesus' baptism is bound up with his own death on the cross, during which he took our unrighteousness upon himself, became sin, and died. Jesus took upon himself our unrighteousness so that we might have his righteousness instead, and receive the

same promise that God gave him at his baptism: "This is my son [or my daughter], the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Speaking in the presence of his Son and the Holy Spirit, Jesus's Father was pleased to name and claim his beloved Son at baptism. And God was even more pleased, in the power of the Spirit, to raise his beloved Son from the dead at his resurrection. The beloved Son speaks and acts with his Father's authority, when he forgives our sin and gives us the Spirit, after we've been drowned. Jesus's righteousness becomes ours at our moment of drowning and death. Joined to Jesus, we come up from the water of our baptism, having God call us too his own beloved sons and daughters.

***Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Trusting God's Decision in Our Baptism***

Directly following his baptism, Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the wilderness. There he was tempted by the devil. Each temptation that Jesus faced called into question whether he was God's Beloved. Rather than trust the promise given to him in baptism, and trust the presence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was tempted to prove that he was the Son of God. Only because he trusted that he was his Father's Beloved Son could Jesus resist the urge to prove himself.

Each temptation that demands that we prove ourselves actually attacks our baptismal identity as beloved sons and daughters of God. We live out our days in the wilderness where we are tempted to forget, neglect, and deny our baptismal identity. However, with Jesus, we claim the promise that we are baptized children of God, through the power of the Spirit's work in our lives, each time we renounce the temptation to prove ourselves to God, the devil, and other people. Instead, by the power of the Holy Spirit and the baptismal promise that can't be taken from us, we

daily trust the decision of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to claim us as beloved sons and daughters.

***Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Death and Resurrection***

We no longer see our baptism the same way. Our baptism is no longer a rite of passage along life's way; it is not a special event consigned to our past, subject to memory. Rather, baptism is an eternal reality; it touches every present moment and determines our future. Our lives are beholden to Christ's baptism, death, and resurrection. Our baptism-shaped lives, therefore, exhibit the characteristics of death and resurrection, drowning and rising daily.

As the community of the baptized called out into the world, we forsake our violent project of trying to create everyone, including God, in our own image. We realize that this forsaking and this death of our own ways is actually our baptism at work in us. The work of our baptism continues in us as we discover the new life and freedom to treat our neighbors more as God has treated us, his own sons and daughters. The people that God places in our lives, we believe, are worth loving, and their lives worth sacrificing for, since God had decided the same for us in our baptism.