

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Over the Thanksgiving break, our family went and visited relatives in the Twin Cities. While we were there we went to the Mall of America. If you haven't heard of it is a massive shopping mall ... the most-visited in the world with 40 million visitors per year. In the center of the mall is an amusement park complete with roller coasters and various rides. I got in line for one of the rides along with Nathan and my niece, I believe it was called the Air Bender. The ride is an inverted arch that goes all the way up to the high ceiling of the indoor amusement park. So the ride starts at the bottom and quickly builds up speed so you're almost hitting the ceiling on one side, then you're almost hitting when it rushes up the other side of the arch. Certainly not the scariest ride around, but still enough to get your blood pumping. Anyway, the anticipation is half the thrill. There's the long line snaking back and forth. Then you get on the ride and strap yourself in. Now here's what may sound a little strange, but the one thing that makes your anticipation peak is that just before the ride starts, the platform on both sides of the ride – the platform you walked across to get on the ride -- actually drops down. Now you realize there's no getting off and the beginning of the ride is imminent. I think I remember shouting to Nathan who was strapped in the next to me: "Here we go!"

What's the point of this whole story? In our church we follow a pericope. A pericope is a series of assigned Bible readings. The church year has two general halves – the festival half and the non-festival half. 4 weeks before Christmas you may recall we started a new church year with the season of Advent. Next came Christmas and the two Sundays after. We now begin the season of Epiphany for several Sundays. Then comes 6 weeks of Lent as we prepare for our Savior's death observed on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter Sunday. Followed by his Ascension... and then Pentecost wraps up the festival half of the church year.

There are two great reasons for following this standard pericope. One reason is that if you miss church here and go to a WELS church in Grand Island, or Denver, CO or even Anchorage, AK, chances are you'll hear the very same reading that you would have heard had you been here at Good Shepherd. (There are exceptions, of course. Sometimes a pastor will depart from the pericope to do a sermon series on a certain topic, teaching or book.) The second great reason for following the standard pericope is that the festival half of the church year takes us through all of the milestones of our salvation as accomplished through the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. The history of Christ is the history of our salvation.

Now back to my original story. You can kind of plug in the festival half of the church year into that ride I was talking about. The season of Advent is like the standing in line. Christmas... you've gotten onto the platform and you're strapping yourself in. This is really happening. Epiphany, I would say, is the platform dropping and the ride starts moving. And we can especially say this of It's when the believer sees God's salvation plan swing into action. It's when the believer's anticipation is at its peak and he says in faith, "Here we go!"

Today's sermon text is about the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. Listen to this short text recorded in Luke 3:21-23.

**The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”**

**When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”**

At the baptism of Christ, we get a glimpse at what the Triune God has done for us... we get a glimpse of God's great salvation set in motion at Jesus' baptism.

Before we look at the actual text, let's think about this question: “Why did this event (Jesus' baptism) need to take place?” Why did God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit appear on this particular day in human history? To answer this question, let's think about our own nature. How would you describe your life with God during this past week? Did you love him perfectly? Did you pray to him frequently? Did you study his Word and obey it joyfully? Did you show God's love to others? During this past week were you friendly to all? Generous to the needy? Did you love your enemies? Did you use some of your money to love people, or did you use some people because you love money? If we honestly examine just one week of our lives, we will properly and perfectly understand our own nature. We are sinners. We fail to do God's will. We are egotistical. We are proud. We also have a tendency to think that we can find our own way to God... that we can think of our own methods of pleasing him... that we can build our own road to heaven. We build for ourselves an idol when we form our own opinions of who God is and what he wants from us.

For such sinful thoughts, words and actions, the Holy God is rightfully angry. For similar sins, God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. He made Cain into a refugee after the murder of his brother Abel. He destroyed nearly all people on earth at the time of the flood. Read your Bibles, and you'll clearly see a God who hates sin and punishes sinners.

However, the presence of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit at Jesus' baptism testifies to his desire and will to save us. The Great Plan was set in motion. Because we sinful human beings are incapable of saving ourselves, God provided his own way of salvation for us. Let's consider how each person of the Trinity acts on behalf of our salvation.

At our Savior's baptism, we know God the Father is present by the voice speaking from heaven. **“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased!”** The whole reason this event was taking place was because the Father sent his Son Jesus into this world to save sinners. God, the righteous Judge, could simply ignore the sins of the world. Even to ignore the sins of believers would not be right. It is unjust to allow a crime to go unpunished. On the other hand, God loves us. He wants to communicate with us. He wants us to be saved. He wants us to live with him eternally.

God must punish sin. God wants to forgive sin. How could this conflict in his nature be resolved? God decided he would punish the sins of all people by punishing a substitute. For this plan to work, the following had to be true of the substitute:

- He would have to be true God because he would be the substitute for all mankind.
- He would have to be true man also, otherwise he couldn't take man's place.

- He would have to accept the punishment willingly, otherwise punishing the substitute would not be unjust.

With this plan, the Father sent his Son into this world to live a perfect life for us, and to die on the cross for our sins. Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his public ministry. It was appropriate that at just this time, the Father announced to all, **“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”** The Father declared his Son to be a worthy substitute for all people. Loved by the Father, and set apart from all sin, Jesus was ready to do the work which his Father sent him to do.

God the Father loves us so much that he gave the one thing that was nearest and dearest to him. He did not spare his only Son, but gave him up for us all. He who gave us his Son will also certainly give us all good things! We see that God the Father desires to save us.

Jesus Christ, God's Son, also desires to save us. Jesus went to John the Baptist to be baptized. In his baptism, he was anointed for the special work he was undertaking. At that moment, Jesus was announcing to the world that he was accepting the Father's plan. He was willing to live a perfect life for all people. He was willing to accept the punishment for all sin. He was willing to suffer and die on the cross to give us life. In short, Jesus was willing to do all that was necessary to win our redemption.

All that Jesus did would have been meaningless if he were not true God. The death of a man – even a good man – would not atone for the sins of the whole world. How do we know that the man standing in the river that day was true God? All of Scripture verifies his divine nature. The man who died on the cross was also true God. We are confident that his death was sufficient to pay for all of our sins, and the sins of the whole world.

It's easy for us to speak of Jesus' work of redemption without fully considering how difficult this work was. Every Sunday was recite in Apostles or Nicene Creed, **“He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried.”** The words roll off our tongue as if these things were quick and easy for Jesus. This is precisely why the season of Lent lasts for 6 weeks and why we have mid-week services... so that we remember the enormity of Jesus' work for our salvation. Jesus knew before he was ever born of the virgin Mary that he would suffer and die in this way. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus knew the soldiers were coming to arrest him. Throughout his suffering and death, Jesus Christ, God the Son, *had* the power to stop the sinful men who were hurting him. But he went the way of the cross willingly for you and for me. It was the only possible way to remove our sins and give us life. We see that God the Son desires to save us.

In our text we also see the third person of the Trinity, God **the Holy Spirit**. He descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove. Note how the evangelist Luke makes special mention that the Holy Spirit was *visibly* present in the dove. The Holy Spirit too is a separate person of the triune God who desires our salvation.

Scripture verifies the divinity of the Holy Spirit in many places. Not the energy of God... not the action part of God... but a separate person of the trinity. The Holy Spirit does things that “energy” can't do. He speaks, he comforts, he corrects, he teaches, he can be offended. He does things only God can do. He participated in the creation of the world. He redeems us. He creates faith. He gives spiritual gifts. The Bible gives the Holy Spirit divine names and divine attributes. The Holy Spirit is God.

Often the Holy Spirit is called the “silent” member of the Trinity. His work is usually

quiet and invisible. He secretly works inside the hearts of people. But just because he is “silent” doesn’t mean his work is unimportant. We are sinners who are incapable of turning from sin to God. We are dead in our sins. We are God’s enemies, and we are powerless to change our spiritual condition. But God the Holy Spirit works in us through God’s Word and the Sacraments. Through the Law, he convicts us of sin. He helps us to understand we are guilty before God. He leads us to repentance. Through the Gospel the Holy Spirit teaches us that Jesus is our Savior from sin. He creates faith in our hearts which relies wholly on Jesus for salvation. He comforts us and assures us of our salvation. He gives us wisdom and understanding so we can read Scripture and receive God’s blessings through it. He gives us every needed spiritual gift so that we can serve God in the church and build up Christ’s church. Without the Holy Spirit, the Father would have sent his Son in vain. Without the Holy Spirit, the Son would have suffered, died and rose in vain. The Holy Spirit takes all of the blessings and gifts of Christ and applies them to each of us individually through faith. Truly, God the Holy Spirit also desires to save us.

Dear Christians, on this Epiphany Sunday, God has made manifest or made evident to us something that not all people see. 1) WE are powerless sinners who deserves nothing good from God. But 2) we see the Lord Jesus resolute to start down the path that would end at the cross so that we might be saved. We see the Triune God determined to do everything necessary to save us from our sins.

Rejoice today at the baptism of Jesus. Because when it comes to our salvation, his baptism tells us... here we go!  
Amen.