

Baptism of Our Lord C 2025 - Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

If Martin Luther had driven a car, it would have had a bumper sticker that said *simul justus et peccator*, meaning that we are simultaneously saints and sinners—justified before God through the faithfulness of Christ, but still struggling daily against sin. This prompted someone to joke that if you're Lutheran, you're on both Santa's naughty and nice lists at the same time. I laughed at that, as a good Lutheran church nerd should, but then shortly after Christmas, I found myself wrestling with that saint and sinner theology. I started watching a TV series that painted a bleak portrait of modern life: isolation, economic hardship, physical and mental illness, injustice, infidelity, substance abuse, violence. Some of the characters were absolute villains. But every episode began by focusing on a different character, with the main character narrating scenes from that person's past. Though not an excuse for some of the awful choices they made, the flashbacks at least shed some light on why they looked at the world the way they did—and often revealed some kind of past trauma that caused lasting damage. As even the not very likable stereotypes became three-dimensional people, I found myself surprised by empathy. And that's when I realized that although I have long studied and taught and preached from Luther's saint-and-sinner perspective, and although I happily apply it to myself, I don't always view other people through that lens. If I can be surprised to find two sides to fictional characters, how much complexity am I missing in real human beings?

Today's lectionary leaves Jesus' childhood behind and takes us to the beginning of his public life and ministry, when Luke tells us he is about 30 years old. Since John and Jesus are cousins, we might expect that they grew up knowing each other. It is unclear how long John had been preaching and baptizing in the Jordan before Jesus comes to be baptized, but John had acquired his own disciples and had attracted the attention both of the religious leaders and Herod, who eventually jails John for criticizing him. The people start to wonder if John is the Messiah, but John corrects them: *one who is more powerful is coming; he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire...*

John baptizes people as a sign of repentance, to mark the turn from sin towards righteousness. But Jesus, who is fully human yet also fully divine, does not need to repent from sin; his baptism means something else. Though Western Christianity focuses on the visit of the magi at Epiphany, the Orthodox Church celebrates Jesus' baptism at Epiphany; and that is a good way to think of it: Jesus' baptism is an epiphany, a revelation of who Jesus is: *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased*. Whereas our world values results and productivity, notice that the Father is well-pleased with Jesus *before* he has done anything miraculous: he hasn't healed anyone yet, he hasn't driven out any demons, he hasn't preached the beatitudes, walked on water, calmed storms, or died on the cross. Luke alone tells us just one thing Jesus has done between his birth and his baptism, that at age 12 he stayed behind in the Temple without telling his parents—causing them to panic for three days while they try to find him. If Jesus had a shelf full of trophies or a laundry list of accomplishments, none of the gospel

writers bothered to tell us about it. Still, the Heavenly Father calls Jesus *Beloved* and says *I am well pleased with you*.

Jesus' baptism is different than that of the other people John baptized, since he didn't need to repent, and Jesus' baptism is different than our baptism, since he didn't need forgiveness of sins like we do. But there are other elements of Jesus' baptism that echo in ours. Whether we are baptized as infants, kids, teens, or adults, God calls us *Beloved* without us having done anything to earn that title. And although the bodily appearance of the Holy Spirit in a form like a dove is unique to Jesus' baptism, we are gifted with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our baptism as well. Jesus' baptism begins his public ministry, and baptism is a beginning for us, too; that's not to say that God is not present and active in our lives before we are baptized, but baptism is an intentional call to discipleship for which we admit we are ill-equipped without the guidance of the Spirit.

Since God is the one who does all the freeing and empowering work in baptism, it doesn't matter how old we are when we are baptized. But baptizing an infant does show that life in Christ is not merely a matter of before and after, as if our lives can be divided—back then when we used to be bad and now that we are good. It's not magic that makes us immune to sin or a guarantee against future temptation. The first thing that happened to Jesus after he was baptized was 40 days of temptation in the wilderness; he doesn't succumb to temptation, but it's still there. So that saint-sinner conflict is not a before-after distinction. Neither is saint and sinner the division between individuals or between groups of people. John's prediction that the Messiah will gather wheat but burn chaff, is not a threat of judgement between good people and bad people. Dividing up the world that way is never helpful: it makes us anxious, worrying if deep down we really are good enough to count as wheat. But even worse than that self-doubt is the confident belief that we are wheat and others are chaff. People of faith are never more dangerous than when we convince ourselves that God is on our side, not theirs.

If we take seriously Luther's claim that we are simultaneously saints and sinners, then we recognize both the wheat and the chaff within ourselves. We are beloved, but we're not perfect. As disciples of Jesus, we should want to get rid of the un-Jesuy parts of ourselves, but since growth can be painful, we are sometimes reluctant to let the Spirit do her thing. I once had a surgical incision that was taking a really long time to heal. Eventually the surgeon applied some chemical that burned, well, like hell. But...that's what finally healed the wound. It's the same for our souls, which is why baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire is not a scary thing but a good thing. May God weed out everything that is not good in us so that we may do God's will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in God's sight; not by our own strength, but through Jesus Christ the Beloved.