

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA
✠ First Sunday after the Epiphany ✠
January 8, 2006

Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

“ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.””

(Matt. 3:13-17, NIV)

Children ask a lot of questions. Their young minds are naturally curious and the way they feed their curiosity is often by asking questions. Have you ever had one of those conversations with a child that was really a string of “why?”s? And when you ultimately can’t go any further you’re forced to exclaim, “Just because.” While that can be frustrating (especially if you are with such a child all day long), it’s really quite amazing to observe a young child’s seemingly endless search for knowledge.

I wonder if God feels the same way about us. We might ask God why this or that happened, and I wonder if he would like to respond, “Just because. That’s why.” Either it’s something we really don’t need to know or something we really wouldn’t be able to understand even if God did tell us.

But on the other hand, when it comes to searching the Scriptures, the question *why?* can be a great tool. When we’re dealing with the things God has revealed to us in his Word, this question can help us dig deeply into those truths. You see, when we approach the Bible with a child-like curiosity, we’re likely to discover all kinds of beautiful aspects of a message we have heard time and time again.

I believe that the Gospel for today provides us with one such example. Just moments ago we sang, “To Jordan’s River Came Our Lord.” But why? Why did Jesus come from his home in Galilee to the Jordan river? I believe that we will find great comfort and encouragement when we find out that **Jesus came to the Jordan** 1) to be baptized by John, 2) to be anointed by the Spirit, and 3) to be approved by the Father.

We’re not left wondering for long why Jesus came to the Jordan that day. Matthew writes, “**Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.**” Well, if Jesus was looking to be baptized, it makes sense that he would go to John the Baptist. But why did he want to be baptized in the first place? It looks like John was thinking the same thing. “**But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”**”

John’s baptism was closely connected to message John preached: “**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.**” His baptism had everything to do with confessing and repenting of sins, and Jesus didn’t have any sins. Jesus didn’t need repentance or forgiveness any more than Bill Gates needs a loan and computer help from me. John didn’t feel qualified to baptize Jesus and instead suggested that Jesus do the baptizing.

But **“Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.**” Notice that Jesus doesn’t argue with John. Technically, what John said was right. Of these two men, John was the one in need of repentance. He was to the one who needed forgiveness.

But it would be proper for Jesus to be baptized. Even though baptism is for sinners, Jesus needed to be baptized **“to fulfill all righteousness.”** It was the right thing to do. Jesus had been doing the right thing all his life. He had perfectly kept all of God’s law in every aspect of his life.

But that’s not all Jesus came to do. Jesus didn’t just come to earth to live a perfect, righteous life. He came to be righteous for you and me. So in order to **“fulfill all righteousness”** he had to put himself in the place of sinners. Jesus came to the Jordan river that day, not for himself, but for us, as our substitute. He allowed himself to be baptized for the same reason he allowed himself to be tempted by the devil, tried and tortured by sinful men, and tormented in hell.

John was right to say to Jesus, “I need to be baptized by you.” But he would have also been right if said, “Jesus, I need you to be baptized for me.” In a few months, on Good Friday, we could stand at the foot of the cross and say, “Jesus, I need to die on the cross and suffer hell. I’m the sinner. I’m the one who disobeyed you and disappointed you. I deserve death and hell.” But we won’t. We’ll stand there and say to Jesus with tears in our eyes, “Jesus, I need you to die and suffer hell for me.”

Why did Jesus come to the Jordan to be baptized by John? Jesus didn’t need it. We needed Jesus to be baptized by John. And he was.

“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him.”

Here again, we need ask ourselves the question *why?*. Why did Jesus need the Holy Spirit to come upon him? We know that Jesus was true God, and while he is a distinct person from the Holy Spirit, he is inseparably linked to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. We also know that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Jesus was not, at any time, without the Holy Spirit. So why did Jesus come to the Jordan to be anointed by the Holy Spirit?

In the Old Testament, kings and prophets were often anointed with oil as a sign that they were set apart for a special task. But the anointing really wasn’t for the sake of the person being anointed, it was really for the people who saw it. I suppose it’s kind of like modern day inauguration. When a new president or governor is elected, a few months later they conduct a big, elaborate ceremony which marks the beginning of the new administration. But the inauguration really isn’t for the president. He doesn’t find out on inauguration day what his job is. The inauguration is for the people. It is an announcement to all that a new leader has come to office and that he is now beginning his work.

Jesus didn’t need the Holy Spirit to come upon him for his sake, but for the sake of those around him. John the Baptist testified that he would not have even known who Jesus was, **“except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’... I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”** The Holy Spirit came down on Jesus like a dove to show the people that this man was indeed the Son of God, the Savior of the world.

Later on, Jesus read these words of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue. **“The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.”** After he read these words he told the people there that this scripture was fulfilled in their hearing. The Holy Spirit

came upon Jesus so that men might know that he was the Savior promised in the Old Testament.

Why did Jesus come to the Jordan to be anointed by the Spirit? Surely he came as a sign to all that Jesus was about to begin his public work as the promised Savior. But he also came so that *we* would know and believe in him as the Savior, as *our* Savior. That's really what the season of Epiphany is all about. In this and several other episodes in the life of Jesus we are able to witness Jesus being revealed as the true Son of God – not just to the people of Jesus' day, but to us.

But there's one more event that we need to ask about this morning. While the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus, we are told **“a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”**

Every child likes to hear that Mom or Dad loves them. So this must have just warmed Jesus' heart to receive his heavenly Father's approval. But I doubt this was news to Jesus. Of course, his Father was pleased with him. He was perfect. If I were perfect, I wouldn't be surprised either if God told me that he was pleased with me.

But I'm not perfect. And neither are you. Truth be told, we're all quite a ways from being perfect and we have been since the day we were born. If God were to say to us, “I'm pleased with you,” now that would be a surprise. Instead we'd be more likely to hear something like, “You've failed me again. You lied. You lusted. You were lazy. Your thoughts and words and actions do not please me.”

God did not express his love for his Son for Jesus' benefit. He already knew that. But *we* need to see that Jesus was perfectly pleasing to God. We need to see that Jesus was God's beloved Son because Jesus came to the Jordan river for us. Jesus was living his perfect life for us. So when God the Father looks at us and our lives, he sees Jesus' life.

You see, just as Jesus was baptized to take our place as sinners, when we are baptized, we take Jesus' place as God's own sons and daughters. When you were baptized you received the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. You received the sign of the cross on your head and your heart and you were marked as a redeemed child of Christ. God the Father announced, “This one is my child. With *him*, with *her*, with *you* I am well pleased.”

Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan. *Why?* He came to be baptized by John, anointed by the Spirit, and approved by the Father. *But why?* Jesus came to the Jordan, not for himself, but for us. To stand in the place of sinners, to announce the inauguration of his ministry, and to announce the Father's love for him that, because of his life, death, and resurrection, is the love God has for each of us. *Why?* Well, I don't know why. I don't know why Jesus did these things for us. I don't know why he loved us. He didn't have to. We didn't deserve it. But the fact that Jesus came to the Jordan for us proves to us that he does love us, and our inquisitive, child-like curiosity can rest confidently in our Father's love for us.