**Heaven Has Been Opened**

**Matthew 3:13-17**

*Baptism of our Lord*

*1.10.2021*

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

For the last few weeks, we have been immersed in the story of the infant Jesus Christ. Interestingly, other than the twelve years old Jesus in the temple, we have no other information on the life of the boy Jesus. Today, we jump ahead in time about 30 years after His birth to the baptism of the child Jesus, now a man. It is why today in the church year is called the Baptism of our Lord.

In the Matthew’s Gospel we have the account of Jesus coming to John the Baptist to be baptized in the Jordan River. These events are also recorded in Mark and Luke’s Gospel. Matthew records that John would have prevented Him. But, Jesus declared, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

Why does Jesus say this? Baptism was not a requirement in the Law of Moses, so Christ's word in Matthew could not be meant to say that Jesus was fulfilling the Law like He had with His circumcision? In fact, baptism was not even some pious custom practiced by the people of the time. Baptism was a new practice brought about by John the baptizer. Mark’s Gospel declares that John came, *baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* (Mk1:4)

Earlier in Matthew, we are told that *Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins*. (Mt. 3:5-6 NASB) This is important to note. Masses of people from the surrounding area were coming to him confessing their sins and being baptized. What an incredible sight that must have been.

Imagine large crowds of people standing and listening to John preach. Yes, I said, standing, or at the best, maybe sitting on a grassy hillside. If you sat down, it would likely mean other people standing would block your view.

Could you imagine standing through a whole sermon? It would be tough to fall asleep that way. By the way, standing up during the Divine service was standard in most congregations, up until no more than about three hundred years ago. Not only would they stand for the whole service, but a typical sermon would last a minimum of 45 minutes. They did not wear watches they kept glancing at to make sure they got out of church in time. People gathered to hear God’s Word and join with their family of faith – it was their priority – everything else came second to that. It was in-face meeting. No social media, but live and in person.

Back to our text. Crowds gathered to listen to John, to repent of their sins, and to be baptized into forgiveness. John's preaching was about the One who would come after him. He preached about The One greater than himself. He preached about the God-Man Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Many ask about the difference between John's baptism and baptism now. The difference is based upon the timing – *when* John baptized. There is no difference in the baptism. Nor is the who was doing the baptizing a difference. John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sins – and in it John pointed them to faith in the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

Baptism still works the same thing. It works the forgiveness of sins and begins faith in Christ. John's baptism is different only in that it pointed forward to Christ’s sacrifice as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, leading people to trust in Him. We point to Jesus as the Lamb of God who *HAS* taken away the sin of the world, and trust in Him.

It is the Word of God which makes baptism efficacious. For the Word unites us to Jesus’ work. Christ’s life, suffering, and death which purchased forgiveness – are bestowed in baptism. John's baptism is different only in that it preceded Christ's life, ministry, death, and resurrection. Baptism today points back to Christ. In either instance, it is Christ’s death and resurrection, delivered in the Word at baptism, which grants forgiveness.

Why was John preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? Because, heaven was shut! In the beginning, this was not so. Adam and Eve were created perfect, they walked in paradise with God. But they ate of the forbidden fruit, the fell into sin and paradise was closed. That intimate relationship with God was broken, heaven was closed. Your inherited sinfulness has kept the doors of heaven shut. Your continued sinfulness slams fast the gates and bolts them closed.

Those doors have been closed so tightly it is beyond your power to open them. Man alone cannot do it. Even your sobbing and pleading cannot open them. You cannot open heaven with your violent protests nor with defiant raging. And you certainly cannot open heaven with your good works, for even your best works are tainted with sin.

Maybe it is a good thing that you cannot open heaven. For if you could open heaven without sin remedied, it would be an angry God, full of wrath who would be waiting. There would be no shower of gifts, no mercy or grace. To understand, all we need to do is examine the Biblical accounts of those times when mankind's sinfulness brings about the opening of heaven. What came down at those times heaven was opened? God’s wrath against sin!

In Noah's day, the sins of the people opened heaven for 40 days and nights of rain, even as God caused the great deep to burst open. The waters rose and everything that was not in the ark with Noah, was destroyed.

Lot left Sodom and Gomorrah and they were destroyed for wickedness. Destruction was wrought by the opening of heaven, a rain of brimstone and fire utterly wiped them out. The whole valley and all the inhabitants were destroyed. Even Lot's wife was not spared, turned to a pillar of salt when she disobeyed God's command and looked back.

When heaven opens for man, it rains down God’s wrath against sin.

God’s grace in our sinfulness is that He has shut heaven. There are no “basically good people who have simply made some wrong choices.” Nobody can dismiss sin as an "alternate lifestyle" or "failure to live up to full human potential" as some would have us believe. All the world’s vast knowledge cannot come up with more elaborate ways to explain away, rationalize, or justify sin. Sin is part of the very fiber of our being, you cannot just cover it or conquer it with your own efforts.

You and I cannot come to God. But God has come to you in His great love for you. God took the initiative. The action is from God to you, as God sent His only Son. This baptism we ponder today is the baptism of the very Son of God. This is He for whom heaven was opened by God ***in love***. This is He who opens heaven now for you, for Christ was baptized to fulfill all righteousness. He was baptized into your sin, to give you His righteousness even as He took your sins to the cross. Romans declares this saying we are baptized into Christ’s death.

In Isaiah we heard God's plan of salvation. How the Lord's chosen would bring justice to the nations. He would give breath, that is, life to the nations. He is the light to the nations, making the blind to see. He brings the prisoners from the dungeon.

Only as heaven is opened by God can these things take place. The heavens opened after Christ was baptized by John. There was no reason for Jesus to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. However, in His baptism, God accepted Jesus for the saving work He was beginning. His work was to live His life in perfect, full, loving obedience to the Law – living in, and fulfilling all righteousness. In allowing Himself to be crucified as the innocent and Holy God-man, His fulfillment of all righteousness was accomplished for you and all mankind.

Christ was baptized for **your** salvation. After His baptism, heaven is rent open. Not rent open because mankind assailed the gates of heaven, but because God burst the bonds of sin asunder. In His own Son, righteousness is fulfilled and God the Father speaks, "This is my beloved Son."

You live each day in your baptism, daily drowning the Old Adam in contrition and repentance. What the Father spoke as Christ stepped out of the river Jordan are words for your ears, "This is my beloved Son."

At Christ's baptism the Father's Words assure the Son that He will be with Him, that He will see Him through temptation. These words are your assurance that you too will be taken care of. Your salvation is accomplished in Christ! Christ was baptized to fulfill all righteousness. God’s Word speaks to you. Your sins are forgiven – IN THE NAME of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. God’s word continues to keep you in your baptismal faith, that Christ is your Savior from sin.

Heaven opens and a dove comes down from heaven and descends upon Jesus. The Holy Spirit comes down and anoints Christ for His future trials, temptation, and finally victory.

We often think of a dove as a symbol of peace. God's peace comes down at Jesus' baptism and you receive it as you are united to Christ through baptism by the working of the Holy Spirit. You are at peace with God, His justice satisfied in Christ’s death, which is now yours.

God's peace is that your sins are forgiven and heaven is open for you. It is opened in love. It is torn open by a love so great that it has no restraints. This Jesus who is baptized before us is your Savior. It is He who splits open wide the heavens and the voice is heard speaking to you, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Living in your baptism, hear those words spoken to you today. You have been united to Christ. He fulfills all righteousness for you, taking your sins upon Himself in His baptism. Today, the forgiveness He earned comes to you again. God’s Word comes to you, and God speaks these words to you, for heaven has been opened for you by Christ.

All sins were answered for by Christ's atoning death in the place of all sinners. It is true, where there is forgiveness of sins there is life and salvation. Dearly beloved of God, rejoice that heaven has been opened, not to let down God's wrath and punishment but to let us poor sinners in. Thanks be to God in the name of Jesus. Amen.