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Epiphany I/The Baptism of Our Lord
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Text: Matthew 3:13 – 17
Title: Connections

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Most of you probably know the music called “*Hail to the Chief*”. What’s the first thing that you think about when you hear that tune? The President of the United States, our American version of royalty. The President lives in a special house that only the President can live in, just like a king’s palace. His arrival is announced whenever he makes a public appearance. An incredible amount of effort and dedication goes into protecting and serving the person who holds the title of President, and it even begins long before that person wins the election.

Even the beginning of the President’s term is similar to the beginning of the reign of a king or queen. Our country holds a celebration called an inauguration every time a new President begins his term. If you’ve ever watched a Presidential Inauguration, then you know all of the things that can happen during those days, but the one thing that it is supposed to center around always seems to get lost in the shuffle. I’m talking about the oath of office. The President must swear this oath from the hand of a federal judge, or he is not the President regardless of how many votes received in the election.

The Presidential Inauguration is just one more example of the royal nature of our country’s most powerful position. The royal comparison would be a coronation. Many countries that have monarchs hold these ceremonies, and without going through one, the intended king or queen can’t rule. It is a public acknowledgement of their right to rule, and in nations that have a religious aspect to their government, such as we saw in England a few years ago, it signifies God’s blessing upon their ascension to the throne.

In both cases, the person changes from one status to another during the course of an elaborate ceremony, and tremendous power is associated with them afterwards. In both cases, the ceremony is done in public to make it clear to the rest of the country and to the world that the authority of the position can now be exercised by that person. And in both cases, the individual typically took years to get to the point of taking over whatever position they were beginning.

In today's Gospel reading from Matthew 3, we don't read about an inauguration or a coronation occurring. Instead, we have the Old Testament equivalent of such an event, Matthew is telling us about an anointing. Today, the first Sunday after the visit of the Magi is celebrated on Epiphany, is the day that the Christian church has historically celebrated the Baptism of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In spite of the world's tendency to overlook this event in its hurry to move onto the next holiday, the Baptism of Jesus is important enough that we who live our lives under the name of Christian still observe and celebrate it today.

Jesus' Baptism by John the Baptist is an event that is generally considered to be the beginning of Christ's public ministry. His Baptism is a public anointing that signifies His status as King of Israel, and it probably occurred when Jesus was about 30 years old. Prior to this event, He lived in relative obscurity and poverty with Mary and Joseph in Nazareth.

But now, His time has come. After He is baptized and endures the temptations of Satan in the wilderness, Jesus begins to publicly preach, teach and perform miracles all over the region, and His reputation spreads rapidly. This is the beginning of His work, and it is the fullness of time that the Lord has been waiting for since the Garden of Eden, the time to bring His plan for salvation to its culmination.

But there is more to this event than just the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Listen again to what Matthew was inspired to write, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented Him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and

do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately He went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on Him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’”

It seems like a pretty simple account, doesn’t it? But as I said, there is more going on here than just a beginning. One of the most obvious things is the arrival of the Spirit of God and the words of the Father from heaven. With these two things, the Holy Trinity is physically present in some distinct and obvious form for the first time in the Scriptures. The Father’s voice proclaims the identity of Jesus, the Son, who is being baptized, and the Holy Spirit descends in the likeness of a dove. With this endorsement of the other two persons of the Trinity, everything that Jesus is about to do is publicly declared to be the work of God. The Father and the Spirit are proclaiming their connection to the Son in a way that we can only begin to see from this event. There is nothing simple about what has happened here.

What does not seem to be happening here is the same Baptism that Christians have practiced as a sacrament since the time of Christ’s command to do it. The Baptism of Jesus was a one-time only event that was done “...to fulfill all righteousness,” and by this event all water used in any Christian baptism from that day until the end of time is and will be blessed. And while there are many connections to the Baptism that you and I have been through, it is not the same for one very significant and obvious reason. When the Lord went down into the water with John, He was already perfect and holy in every way. No one else who has ever been baptized can say that.

Every person who has been baptized was a sinner before the water was applied, and everyone has sinned after it. It doesn’t matter who you are or at what age you were when you were

baptized, you were a sinner before it happened. If that weren't the truth, then you wouldn't have needed Baptism in the first place.

But the fact of the matter is that you and I needed to be baptized. Everyone does. It is the method by which God has chosen to claim and mark sinners as His own children. The unbaptized person has no hope at all. Sin has a firm hold over that person's soul, and they are completely lost. Their sinful nature is in open rebellion against God, and wants absolutely nothing to do with Him in their lives. Quite the contrast to the holiness and perfection of Christ when He was baptized, isn't it?

Your sinful nature is still waging an all out war against God. He is the enemy, and the sinful nature wants nothing more than to defeat Him at all costs. It will not quit while you are alive, and that is why God knew that He had to kill it. That's what Paul is getting at in today's Epistle reading from Romans 6. Listen to his words again, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life...we have been united with him in a death like his...our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing...For one who has died has been set free from sin..." There is no mistaking the meaning here. God is very clear about what He is doing through Baptism; He is killing your sinful self. He is winning the war for your soul.

But in order for God to win, you must die, and that's exactly what Baptism accomplishes. He uses the power of His Word, and He combines it with water to drown your soul to death. But just like there was more to Christ's Baptism, there is more going on here than our death through Baptism. Paul helps us to understand the rest of God's intentions, "We were buried therefore with [Christ] by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death

like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his...Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

God did not intend to leave you dead after Baptism. He reached down, and raised up a new you that lives in Christ Jesus. From that point on, you and I became heirs of the promise of salvation. And while your physical body will still die in this world because of the effects of sin, He will raise it up again on the Last Day because He has claimed it as His own through Baptism, and He bought and paid for it with His own death on the cross.

There are many connections between our Baptism and the Baptism that Jesus was given. Water is used. The person being baptized does absolutely nothing. The Holy Trinity is present, and one of the Father’s children emerges from the water when it is all over. What is different is the condition of the baptized. We were sinners before going into the water, and we have sinned since we came out of it. But Baptism drowns the sinful self each and every time it raises its ugly head, and a new person rises up again in its place. That process will continue until the day that we are called home to be with Him, and all righteousness is fulfilled once and for all.

Until that day, unfortunately, there are many who do not know that they need Christ, and the gifts that He gives through Baptism. Sadly, that includes many who call themselves Christians, but have been led astray by false teachers. These people, whether they call themselves Christians or not, need to hear the pure Gospel, and they need to have their lives unburdened by the Law. They need to know what God does for them through Baptism, and they need to hear it from us who have been called by Christ through our own Baptism to be His witnesses to the very ends of the earth. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.