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## Baptism of Our Lord One Year Series 2017

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## **The First Sunday after the Epiphany - The Baptism of our Lord**

January 8, 2017

*The One Year Series exhibits a bit of indecision on this date. The historic series does not celebrate the Baptism of Christ, but appoints other readings. These are the readings Luther addresses in his comments and the readings we are looking at today. The lectionary at the time of Luther appointed the final verses of Luke 2 for this Sunday, the account of the young Jesus in the temple. My guess is that we are looking at the Baptism of Christ readings, but Luther's Postil does not address those readings, at least in the translations I have of Luther's material and my admittedly limited facility in German means you are better off when I am working with the translations. I have, however, found that Luther does treat these readings in other places and have endeavored to include them here.*

*Before one considers the Baptism of Christ account, the event itself raises a few issues for us. This is an excerpt from my notes on the three year cycle which also treats the Baptism of Jesus:*

*Here, at the beginning of his ministry, the Lord is revealed by the attestation of the voice from heaven, God's voice: This is my Son. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus and we are given to see all members of the Trinity together on one page of sacred text. But the main point is that this is revealing the Jesus who was worshiped by mages at Epiphany and was celebrated as incarnate the week before. The Lord has so hidden himself in the flesh of man that he needs to be pointed out to us or we would miss him. So authentic is his humanity that we might simply pass over him as another simple human being, one of the billions who have run this race. But this contestant in the human struggle is no mere man. He is also the Lord of heaven and earth, he is God. So our ears and our eyes are given to see and hear that this man who stands under the trickling waters of John's baptism is not simply another in a long line of penitents. He is man and God. He is revealed.*

*This raises a number of questions for us, some of which bear fruit in sermons. What is the baptism of John? If we understand it to be a baptism of repentance, is that the same baptism into which we are baptized? Or is our Triune baptism a baptism of repentance and something more? Was John's baptism something more? What is the connection between our baptism and the baptism of John? The collect appointed for the day obviously wants to connect our baptism to Jesus' baptism, but we will need to understand the nature of that connection. (Our Baptist neighbors insist that John's is a Christian baptism or that the Christian baptism and John's baptism are identical. They will insist in turn that they are still doing that sort of baptism. Are they right? What do they do with Acts 18 and 19 in which Paul re-baptized those who only knew John's baptism?)*

*If it is a baptism of repentance and something different than the Christian repentance, as is most commonly understood, just what is Jesus doing there? After all, did he not lead the sinless life? Why is he repenting? He has committed no sin of which he must repent. Matthew's treatment of this event seems to address this very subject. John raises the question when Jesus shows up at the*

*water. “I have need to be baptized by you,” says John. But Jesus will insist. It is to “fulfill all righteousness.” What does he mean by that? How is this seemingly inappropriate baptism of a man who did not need to repent fulfilling all righteousness? It would seem to be an inappropriate and hence by definition “unrighteous” thing to do. If you forgive an innocent man, that is not justice but a breach of justice, for he has done nothing which needs the forgiveness. What would have been lacking if Jesus did not do this?*

*The best way to answer that it seems to me is to remember that Jesus came to bear the sins of the world. He is at the same moment both sinless and sin. (See II Corinthians 5:21 – “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”) He has willingly shouldered the burden we cannot bear and that means that he will repent of these sins in a way we cannot. In one sense he should not be here, but in another and very real sense, he needs to repent more than anyone else, for his burden of sin is the aggregate sin of the whole world. If he doesn’t, we are incapable of doing it and all is lost. If all righteousness is to be fulfilled, these sins must be repented of. I cannot get the repentance piece correct and it has to be done. Jesus even repents for me.*

*Jesus is revealed today as the one who bears our sins, even repenting of them perfectly. He not only bears the sins of our naughtiness, but also the sins of our brokenness.*

*We might also ask if John’s baptism is a summoning out of the temple worship of the day. John’s location in the desert, away from the traditional site of the Jewish cult suggests that perhaps he was making a statement against that establishment. Was he calling the people of Israel back out into the desert where they were formed and forged as a nation under Israel, where Elijah had fled from the evil of Ahab, where Isaiah saw them being purified in the days of the exile?*

*Is another message found in the obedient submission of Jesus? The current generation doesn’t want to hear sermons about obedience. To what is God calling us today?*

*The preacher might also focus on the phrase of Jesus: “fulfilled all righteousness.” John was part of fulfilling the ministry of Christ. We too are part of that. One could go to Matt 28 with that, or Colossians 1 or Romans where Paul speaks of his own ministry filling up the ministry of Christ. One could see this connect to II Corinthians 4-5 in which we are called ambassadors for Christ.*

### **Collect of the Day**

Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River You proclaimed Him Your beloved Son and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*This prayer asks us to consider the baptism of Jesus and then jumps to our own baptism? Is that legitimate? Of course remembering our own baptism is a very Lutheran thing to do and never inappropriate, but at how deep of a level dare we take the connection between the baptism of*

*Jesus at the hands of John and the baptism commissioned by Jesus in Matthew 28? In an interesting chapter in Acts, Paul runs into some fellows who know only the baptism of John. He baptizes them. This would suggest that that the baptism of John is not the same thing. (Acts 19:1-7)*

*Of course both baptisms involve repentance and water, but the Christian baptism involves something more, it also is the promise to forgive and restore that of which one repents. Was that promised action by God implicit in the baptism which John administered to the people in the Jordan or were they expecting that forgiveness to come later? We read in our confessions that the water of a Christian baptism is not only symbol of the washing which we seek, it is the very washing itself. John was preparing people for this event, he was not actually forgiving their sins, he was getting them ready to be forgiven, or was his baptism more than that? The Christian baptism is an act of that forgiveness, was John's? If so, why did Paul re-baptize?*

*I only bring this up because it is so easily confused and in a climate in which so many are suggesting that our baptism is but a symbol of some inner working by the Holy Spirit, we are given an occasion to speak of our sacramental and incarnate Lord working a miracle in my life though the water of baptism. Don't miss that opportunity.*

*Perhaps a word also needs to be made of the repentance element in Christian baptism. In the rite we know today this has somewhat atrophied into the "Do you renounce the Devil and all his works and all his ways." For the ancients, this was a very serious matter. They understood that baptism involved a wholesale change of heart and life. We will see this clearly in today's epistle lesson. The emperor Constantine delayed his baptism until his death bed because he knew that some imperial actions were incompatible with what was expected of the baptized. Do we have any such notion about baptism today? Is it simply a ritual, often done to appease grandparents or to enroll a child in a church to which the parents have little or no affiliation? Do we need to be saying "No" to more candidates for baptism if we are praying this prayer honestly? If someone does not have any intention of fulfilling their promise should we baptize them? Does it work that way? I know that my father and other Pastors I respect a great deal would baptize any willing candidate or child whose parents brought him/her to the font. I laud that and there is a confession being made in that very stance. Baptism does something to the person who is baptized. Yet, I wonder if we don't need to regain that element of baptismal repentance.*

*We are asking God to make all of us faithful to our calling as the children of God and fellow heirs with Christ of heaven itself. Do we actually think that a person should be different after their baptism? How so? This might be a very fruitful discussion and have some serious homiletic implications.*

*These questions may also be a distraction, and we need to remember this, lest we lose sight of the most important things. Perhaps the connection between the story we read today and the baptism we enjoy in Christian churches is not the baptismal act itself, but the one who gets baptized today in the Gospel lesson is in fact the one into whose name we are baptized.*

Isaiah 42:1-7

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my Spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
<sup>2</sup> He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;  
<sup>3</sup> a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
<sup>4</sup> He will not grow faint or be discouraged  
till he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his law.

<sup>5</sup> Thus says God, the LORD,  
who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people on it  
and spirit to those who walk in it:  
<sup>6</sup> “I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness;  
I will take you by the hand and keep you;  
I will give you as a covenant for the people,  
a light for the nations,  
<sup>7</sup> to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

## Luther

We shall treat this passage briefly<sup>1</sup> because it is dealt with in Matthew...Now he draws near to the Leader Himself, Christ, concerning whom he earlier began, “Comfort, comfort” (Is. 40:1). This is an outstanding statement. He speaks of the Head, who is nevertheless a man, and he unites a man with divine glory and calls Him Servant. From various idolatries and sects he calls us to this one Christ, who is the unique sign that heals us.

*Behold* These are words of demonstration, as if he were pointing to something worth seeing. He is calling us away from errors and therefore showing us someone else. This also

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<sup>1</sup> Always a relative thing with Luther – his notes on chapter 42 run to 23 pages in *Luther's Works*.

applies to our Enthusiasts, who dream that they are masters and stand in their own opinions, trusting in the heavenly Spirit. Here, however, the prophet points us to the Incarnate One and says that in this Head alone, in the unity of faith, we who were formerly scattered must be brought together. To one who asks, "Where can I gather all the scattered people?" he replies by pointing us to the means, *Behold My Servant*. Here He gives Him the doctor's degree. "If you want to know and be wise, look to this Christ, the Doctor and the one in charge and up and doing. Him I have put in charge. Keep your eye on Him, observe what He does, says, and teaches, because He is My Servant." This was not written for Christ's sake but for ours, so that we may be sure about His work, and teaching and may have certainty about the emptiness of our idolatry. Nobody understands these things unless he believes. You must believe that Christ is a servant...Meanwhile the pope and the Enthusiasts are shouting about a glorious Christ. Here, however, we have the most reliable voice, and this teaching is for us. I has in it no so much praise of Christ as doctrine for us. By why is it necessary for Christ to be praised as Servant and Elect One? It is necessary because this Christ is an offense to the whole world. Therefore, in order to give us certainly, this commendation of Christ is necessary...

We heard last time that these things are said concerning Christ for our sake, and all of it in opposition to our own righteousness, whether they are those of superstition or whether they are of a civil nature. Civil righteousness is indeed necessary before the world, but the superstitious kind is most destructive, because the more flourishes, the more people rebel against civil righteousness. From that superstition he recalls us and sets us before us the true righteousness in Christ, the chosen Servant, in whom God delights and who is full of the Spirit.

*A bruised reed He will not break.* This is a golden text which most beautifully sets Christ before us. It should be expounded at great length. It begins with metaphors. With these words he indirectly attacks the ungodliness and plague of the self-righteous, who went about with extreme severity and approved of no one. The gray hoods, the monks, were the very best, although they, too, were without faith. St. Paul has this in mind when he says (Rom 14:1): "As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him." It takes real skill, for the teacher of the church should not confuse but build up the bruised and timid conscience. This is what Paul is saying: Have patience with all, because there are many such consciences tormented by Satan. This text sets forth Christ as the true Physician, Guide, and Pastor, who is able to provide healing for them. This is a hymn of praise to Christ, who is commended to us. All self-righteous, on the contrary, go by with closed eyes and let a disturbed conscience lie, saying, "Thus it is written, thus it is spoken." Clinging to this Scripture passage, they break the bruised reed.

*(Luther's Works, Vol. 17. CPH. Pp.*

Psalm 85

LORD, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.  
<sup>2</sup> You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you covered all their sin. Selah  
<sup>3</sup> You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.

<sup>4</sup> Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us!  
<sup>5</sup> Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?  
<sup>6</sup> Will you not revive us again,  
that your people may rejoice in you?  
<sup>7</sup> Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,  
and grant us your salvation.

<sup>8</sup> Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;  
but let them not turn back to folly.  
<sup>9</sup> Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,  
that glory may dwell in our land.

<sup>10</sup> Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;  
righteousness and peace kiss each other.  
<sup>11</sup> Faithfulness springs up from the ground,  
and righteousness looks down from the sky.  
<sup>12</sup> Yes, the LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.  
<sup>13</sup> Righteousness will go before him  
and make his footsteps a way.

#### I Corinthians 1:26-31

<sup>26</sup> For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, <sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

*This text shows up in series A on Epiphany IV. Here are lightly edited notes from the last time I treated this.*

*Jesus turns the world upside down. Power is not the mover of the world, but indeed love is. God has a special spot for little people. He loves them when the world would cast them aside as worthless. The world values the strong, the wise, the important. It calls them noble and heaps its honors upon them. God holds the poor man in his hands and delights to pick him up, set him upon his feet and attend to his needs, great and small.*

*This weakness and poverty, however, ought not only to be seen in terms of its economic realities. To do so is the make the mistake of Marx. The economically potent in the world can also be morally bankrupt, in fact we find that they often are, excusing the inexcusable with cash. Just recently a young man killed someone while driving drunk and was given a light sentence because he was too privileged and had not learned to make good moral decisions. Our people likely know this sense of outrage at this sort of injustice on a number of levels. The bankers get bailed out but the homeowners have found the stimulus to be less than stimulating. We of course almost always give the wealthy a pass on this. What we would likely call the behavior of a spoiled brat gets glamorized when perpetrator's last name is Bieber, Hilton, or Kardashian. Yet, the implications of this are profound. Does God hold the morally challenged, the mentally challenged, the economically challenged, and the physically challenged in the same hand? Did Jesus die for all of this? Of course we confess that he did. But it can be hard to say sometimes.*

*Our boast is not in ourselves, no matter our capacity, it is in the Lord and only in the Lord. Americans today have a hard time relating to these words which Paul preaches. Life-long Lutherans have often find such humility mixed into their childhood breakfast cereal so they are not shocked by what Paul is saying here. (My very Lutheran grandfather began almost every day with what he called "hofferschleim" which literally translates as "oat slime." Hard not to be humble when you have that first thing in the morning!) But I wonder how often they are not, oxymoronicly, a little proud of their humility. God loves humble people, I sure am glad that I am humble so God can love me. Paul advocates here and in other places, notably in Philippians 2, an ethos which was utterly upside-down to a normal Roman and increasingly to a normal American. The man who ponders his own humility is still pondering himself. Paul advocates for a life which is truly centered on Christ.*

*When medieval Europe found itself in need of renewal it was a Francis of Assisi and a Dominic who attracted great followings and called the whole civilization to repentance by giving up everything, donning the rough spun habit of a penitent and begging for their meals, even though both of them came from wealthy back grounds. They were not well liked by their contemporaries and the good solid folk of the 13<sup>th</sup> century whose children ran off to follow them thought they had joined some freakish cult. Yet in their renunciation of all things for the sake of Christ they gained a stature which no wealth or power could have given them. God has used the weak and the powerless to shame the strong and the important of the world. How will he do that for this generation? Perhaps, and this is dangerous, deacons will be the instrument for God to shame the*



*preachers, but not because that is our goal but because in emptying ourselves in service to Him we are made into the instruments of God for the sake of his precious people. How's that for subversive?*

*Paul is deep into an argument here about the unity which the congregation in Corinth needs. Pride, the sort of self-focused and blind pride which sees nothing else, is toxic to unity and brotherhood. Paul's ability to put his arm around Sosthenes (hard to believe that was less than 20 verses before the start of this reading!) is directly connected to the upside-down world which Christ's cross and love implies. The focus upon the other, the humility, and the self-sacrifice will be the key ingredients for a true unity. Without this ability to cast one's vision outside the self, we will always be at war with one another. Shared goals and by-laws will never keep us together in the long run.*

**Sermon Idea:** Boasting in the Lord (That the hearer would declare the righteousness which God has strangely bestowed on the lowly sinners of this world.)

My mother was death on boasting. My guess is that yours was too. The preacher will be working against this virtue in a sense. It is true, no one really likes to be around the boatful person. The self-centered man who can only talk about himself is just odious. But in Paul's day, boasting was a virtue of sorts. People did it all the time. Read a little of Julius Caesar's account of the Gallic Wars and you might be shocked. We would likely label him a braggart!

But Paul wants his Roman audience to relocate their boast, no longer in their deeds, but exclusively in the gift of Christ. On this day as we consider the baptism of Jesus, we are given to see just what it is that he has done. He has taken upon himself the sins of whole world. We are not even able to repent of them adequately, but he does, he does for us.

I can therefore say that I am perfect because Jesus has taken those sins to Calvary and paid their price. The Holy Spirit has made me holy, bringing to me the very righteousness of Christ which no sin can assail, which death cannot stomach, before which the Devil himself must flee. I have a boast, you see, a boast in Christ. I can stand tall and proud and confident.

Of course, this is not in myself. I cannot stand on that shifting ground and not fall flat, the object of the world's and Satan's ridicule and derision. Paul is right. God has chosen the weak and the helpless things of this world to show up the strong. He has chosen us. He has given us the very treasures of heaven. This makes no sense, don't ask it to. God's love looks foolish to this world and even to the people like us who receive it. It doesn't make sense, but it is true despite that. And we can boast in it!

We can tell the world that Christ has forgiven a miserable, weak, foolish person like me. Christ has given me God's favor. I am free from the fear of death and grave. I am God's child, no enemy will stand against him. I have a boast, you see. But boast is something that you tell someone. A boast unuttered is hardly a boast. The self-centered, odious man we imagined earlier is only such because he cannot stop talking about himself. The bottled up boast is not a boast!

Paul calls us today to boast in Christ.

This Sunday is the beginning of a season we call Epiphany. It started a few days ago, when the Church remembered the visit of the Magi to the child Jesus on January 6. The season is about revealing Jesus to the world. Over the next weeks Jesus will do miracles, preach, and call disciples. He will do all the things which belong to the Messiah. But most of all, he will do the thing which matters most. He will save this sinner. Praise him for it. Boast in it. Let this Epiphany-tide be a time of Christ's revelation to your family, friends, co-workers, and fellow students. Boast that Christ, the child of Bethlehem whose birth we celebrated just a few weeks ago, is your rescuer, your Lord. He owns you and calls you his own. He is not ashamed of your faults and failings, your sins and brokenness. He has died for them all. He has given you his goodness in its place.

Go boast about that. Be the epiphany people.

Matthew 3:13-17

*While Luther does not deal with this reading in his Postil notes, he does preach on it. Here in a sermon preached in Dessau on April 2, 1540. This was the occasion of a prince's baptism. He preached at the actual baptism service on April 1 and then continued the sermon on April 2*

### **Luther**

Yesterday we began to speak about the baptism of Christ and said that he accepted it from John for the reason that he was entering into our stead, indeed, our person, that is, becoming a sinner for us, taking upon himself the sins which he had not committed, and wiping them out and drowning them in his holy baptism. And that he did this in accord with the will of God, the heavenly Father, who cast all our sins upon him that he might bear them and not only cleanse us from them through his baptism and make satisfaction for them on the Cross, but also clothe us in his holiness and adorn us with this innocence.

Is not this a beautiful, glorious exchange, by which Christ, who is wholly innocent and holy, not only takes upon himself another's sin, that is, my sin and guilt, but also clothes and adorns me, who am nothing but sin, with his own innocence and purity? And then besides dies the shameful death of the Cross for the sake of my sins, through which I have deserved death and condemnation, and grants to me his righteousness, in order that I may live with him eternally in glorious and unspeakable joy? Through this blessed exchange, in which Christ changes places with us (something the heart can grasp only in faith), and through nothing else, are we freed from sin and death and given his righteousness and life as our own.

Now, wherever this is preached and known on can most certainly judge and conclude that all, no matter who they are or what they are called, how teach or do otherwise than what is here said in order to be rid of sin and gain god's grace, are wrong, and that they are lost and

condemned with all their devotions, good intentions, rigorous living, onerous and great works, even if they performed more of them. For they insist that they can propitiate God's wrath and acquire grace and salvation through their own righteousness and merit, which adequately shows that they know nothing at all of this blessed exchange. On the contrary, what they think is: Even though I am a sinner, there is no need to worry, I can take care of the matter; I will do this or that to the praise of God and he will accept it, and so on.

What it means, however, is that which is our own, no matter how good and holy it may seem, is nothing in the sight of God; it must become nothing and be utterly dead. For if we could atone for sin and drive out death by human powers, it would not have been necessary for Christ to become man and be baptized and die for our sins. Therefore if you would not fail and be lost, believe the Scriptures, which testify that all men are sinners, that before God no man living is righteous [Ps. 143:2; Rom. 3:20]. But if they are to become righteous, this must come to pass through Christ, the blessed Seed of whom it was promised to Adam, Abraham, etc., that he would crush the serpent's head and redeem the whole world from its curse. This he did; he took the sin of the whole world upon himself; he became a curse for us, and thus redeemed from the curse all those who believe in him. (Gal. 3:13).

Such knowledge and faith produces a joyful heart, which is certain and can say: I know of no more sins, for they are all lying on Christ's back. Now, they can never lie both upon him and upon us. Therefore no one can say that he makes satisfaction for sin through his own righteousness or discipline; for atonement and redemption of sin belongs to Christ alone. But Christ is neither my work nor yours nor any man's works. Nor are they his body and blood, which he sacrificed for our sins; he is true God, true man, who bears the sins of the whole world. But he takes them and drowns and smothers them in baptism and the Cross, and lets you proclaim that he has given his body for you and poured out his blood for the forgiveness of your sins. And if you believe this, then they are forgiven, you are good and righteous, you receive the Holy Spirit, in order that henceforth you may be able to resist sin. And when through weakness you are overtaken by it, it shall not be imputed to you, as long as you otherwise remain in this faith...

But Christ says, "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness;" as much as to say: The purpose of my baptism is to wash away and drown the sins of all the world, that through it all righteousness and salvation may be accomplished. Therefore baptism was instituted by God primarily for Christ's sake and then afterwards also for the sake of all men. For first he must sanctify baptism through his own body and thereby take away the sin, in order that afterwards those who believe in him may have the forgiveness of sins. Therefore baptism is not a useless, empty thing as the sectarians blasphemously say, but in it all righteousness is fulfilled.

Then , repentance, as John preaches it for the forgiveness of sins, consists mostly in your acknowledging that God is right and confessing that his judgment is true when he says that we are all sinners and all condemned. When you do this from the heart, then repentance has begun. What more must I do then? Bow down and be baptized. For, says Christ, by my baptism I have accomplished it, that whoever believes in me and accepts this baptism receives the forgiveness of sins, and my Father and I and the Holy Spirit will dwell in him.

Therefore wherever anybody is being baptized according to Christ's command we should be confidently convinced that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is present there, and that there is pure delight, pleasure, and joy in heaven over the fact that sin is forgiven, the heaven's opened forever, and that now there is no more wrath but only grace unalloyed.

*(Luther's Works, Vol. 51. CPH. Pp. 315-318)*

**Sermon Idea:** The Beautiful, Glorious Exchange (That the Holy Spirit would move the hearer to rejoice that Christ has taken his/her sin and given him/her His righteousness.)

What is Jesus doing in that line of sinners about to be baptized? He has no sins to repent of? This is odd? Or is it wonderful? Paul says in II Corinthians 5:21 that God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us. But Paul goes on, not only does God make him into sin for us, he does it so that we can become the very righteousness of God!

This Baptism of our Lord Jesus focuses our attention on what Luther calls this beautiful and glorious exchange. It cannot be called rational. It belongs to no economy which makes any sense to our human way of thinking. God who is perfect and powerful, good and eternal, has taken upon himself the very form of a servant (Philippians 2:1-12). This is no sham. He does not simply pretend to be a servant, but he takes that servanthood fully to himself. We know from reading the Gospels that he will walk the dusty roads of Galilee. The only riding we hear of him doing is on Palm Sunday when he borrows a donkey. He will work himself to exhaustion at times. He will surround himself with common folk, fisherman, peasants, even a prostitute or two. There won't be kings and princes in his entourage, just Peter, James, and John. Finally, when his course is run, he will walk bravely into the very jaws of death, submit to the harsh blows of soldiers and die a criminal's death because he has taken to himself all your sins.

But taking your sins has not left some empty spot, some negative reality that is itself a blemish. Jesus has filled that void as well. He has given you his righteousness, not some down payment, not some pretend righteousness, but the real thing. He has given us a true righteousness. No, the world does not see it, and in truth when I look in my own mirror, I am not able to discern it either, but he gives it. By faith, and by faith alone I can apprehend this truth about myself. I will not find evidence or proof sufficient through some scientific or other means. Only God's promise can suffice here. He must tell me that I am right and his Word makes it so.

The fact that this gift of righteousness is something we must trust through faith, does not mean that it is irrationally absent from the life of people. The preacher will want to be ready to talk about people whom this gift of righteousness has led to acts which reflect that righteousness. But the preacher will want to be careful of the comparison trap which sometimes ensues. We might be able to discern the righteousness of God in this life or that one, but often this righteousness is hard to see, even impossible for someone to discern as particularly divine. The righteous person will mow his or her lawn, care for family, go to work, and cash checks at the bank just like anyone else. What will be different is the heart and whole person who does these things.