

**The Baptism of Our Lord**  
**January 8-9, 2011**  
**Matthew 3:13-17**

*“Back to the Jordan”*

With the advent of GPS technology, as well as Mapquest and other navigation-direction websites, one of life’s experiences that has now been greatly reduced is the conversation in the car that goes something like this: “Didn’t we just pass through this intersection before?” Silence... Then, a few minutes later: “That building looks very familiar. I’m sure that we have already been here before.” More silence... A few more minutes later: “That is the same street that we went by just a few minutes ago. We are going in circles here. We need to stop and ask for directions.” At this point, the conversation can go in one of three different directions: 1) more silence; 2) “I know where I’m going, and I don’t need to stop and ask for directions;” and 3) “Yes, dear.” Today may be one of these “haven’t we already been here?” moments. Only a month ago in the season of Advent, we were standing on the banks of the Jordan River as John the Baptist thundered to the people who came to him to be baptized: **“Bear fruit that is worthy of repentance.. I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire”** (Matthew 3:8, 11). And now today, we are back at the Jordan River once more as the One of whom John spoke came down into the water to be baptized: Jesus, whose birth we have rejoiced in, and whose baptism now marks him as God’s Beloved Son who would fulfill all righteousness. With these thoughts as background, the message for this day is entitled “Back to the Jordan.” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

People still gather at the Jordan River in Israel to be baptized today. It’s not that the water there is any better or more holy than any other water, but it is the place where our Lord was himself baptized. And so it is linked with the origins of our Christian faith. The Jordan River runs in an almost perfect north-south line from its mouth near Mount Hermon in the north until it empties into the Dead Sea in the south. The Jordan River was that eastern boundary for Galilee, Samaria, and Judea. And it was here – where John baptized the Lord Jesus – that God’s people first entered into the Promised Land after their exodus from slavery in Egypt and their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Israel was the old son of God, chosen by God to carry his Name and his salvation to the world. Sadly, this did not happen. Israel’s mission to the world became self-focused and turned inward, shutting out the world. It became an “us vs. them” outlook. And so a new Son of God was sent who would do what the old son of God did not. And it begins right here at the Jordan. Isaiah speaks of him in today’s Old Testament lesson: **“Here is 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”** (Isaiah 42:1). It is in Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan River that Isaiah’s words find their fulfillment. Here at the Jordan, the three Persons of the Holy Trinity are revealed: The Father’s voice that declares, **“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”** (Matthew 3:17), the Son who willingly submits himself to be baptized, and the Holy Spirit, descending like a dove and resting upon the Lord Jesus.

John protested about baptizing Jesus. He didn’t want to do it: **“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”** (Matthew 3:14). John recognized his own unworthiness, and consented only after Jesus

told him: **“Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness”** (Matthew 3:15). John put into words what we ourselves know to be true: Jesus did not need baptism for repentance or forgiveness of sins as we do. Today’s Epistle lesson tells us that in holy Baptism we have been baptized into Jesus’ own death and resurrection; into all that Christ has done for us through his suffering, death, and resurrection. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul writes: **“We were buried therefore with him 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”** (Romans 6:4).

So, why then was Jesus baptized? As he himself told John: **“to fulfill all righteousness”** (Matt. 3:15). Jesus’ baptism publicly marked him as God’s beloved Son, his chosen Servant, who would through his life of humble service, his power over sickness, death, demons, and forces of nature, his innocent suffering and death, his glorious resurrection, fulfill all righteousness. In the course of all that Jesus did in his earthly life and ministry – people hanging on him morning, noon, and night all wanting something; thick-headed disciples and followers who didn’t get it; opposition, hostility and death threats from the religious leaders; misunderstanding and confusion about who he really was – did Jesus ever need to go back to the Jordan? Did Jesus have need to return to his own baptism and reclaim the Father’s blessing and the presence of the Spirit for himself? If so, Scripture is silent on this.

I don’t know whether Jesus ever went back to the Jordan, but I do know that we have need to go back to the waters of our own Baptism, wherever and whenever that may have taken place. Like Jesus, we’ve got stuff hanging over our heads – deadlines, commitments, obligations, people who need this or that from us. Like Jesus, we may be experiencing opposition and hostility in our own lives. Like Jesus, there may be misunderstanding and confusion about who we really are. Left unchecked, these things can make us crazy and drive us to despair. This is where all of us have need to go back to our own Jordan – back to what God did for us in holy Baptism. In the cleansing waters of Baptism, God has recreated us, claimed us as his own children of hope and promise, declaring: “This is my son, this is my daughter, my beloved.” Because Jesus has fulfilled all righteousness for us, we are now declared holy and righteous in God’s sight. That’s something we need to lay claim each and every day. Make that sign of the cross each day when you get up, remembering how that sign was first traced upon us in holy Baptism. Strengthened and renewed through God’s gift of forgiveness, life, and salvation in Baptism, we go forth at the beginning of this new year to do as God’s Word tells us: **“walk in newness of life”** (Romans 6:4). God help us to do this for Jesus’ sake. Amen.