

The Baptism of Our Lord
January 9-10, 2016
Luke 3:15-22

“Being SJLC 2016: Neighbor to Us All”

Baptism is our focus in worship today – the baptism of Jesus and our own Baptism into his death and resurrection. This is the theme each year on this first Sunday after Epiphany. That word “epiphany” means to manifest or show forth, and that’s exactly what’s happening there at the Jordan River. Jesus is manifested there in the waters of the Jordan as God’s beloved Son. This is one of those instances where the three Persons of the Triune God are all manifested: the voice of the Father who declared of Jesus, **“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased”** (Luke 3:22), the Son who was obedient to the Father’s will and was baptized, and the Holy Spirit who **“descended on him [Jesus] in bodily form, like a dove”** (Luke 3:22). Today we begin our month-long focus during this Epiphany season that is called **Serving Jesus – Living in Community 2016**, or more simply **Being SJLC 2016**. St. John’s Lutheran Church can be abbreviated “SJLC,” but that acronym can also stand for Serving Jesus – Living in Community. Building on last year’s theme when we explored *Joining Jesus on His Mission*, our theme this year for Being SJLC 2016 is “How to Neighbor – Locally and Globally.” And it all begins today with the baptism of Jesus, who by his birth and baptism, by his life of ministry, his suffering, death and resurrection, has manifested himself for the life of the world. Jesus has become neighbor to us all. Based on today’s Gospel lesson, that is the theme for today’s message: “Neighbor to Us All.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

In this church year that began with the season of Advent, the appointed Gospel lessons will largely come from Luke’s Gospel. Luke’s narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus points to a Savior who is passionate about and shows compassion for the marginalized and alienated in society. The theme of Luke’s Gospel can be found in the first few verses of chapter 15 where we hear three parables on what it means to be lost and found: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons (usually called the prodigal son). Those first verses of chapter 15 say this: **“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them’”** (Luke 15:1-2). That’s it right there. Beginning with his baptism at the Jordan River, Jesus began to show forth, to manifest, God’s love for the people that everybody else had written off: tax collectors who were seen as collaborators with the hated Romans and so were detested and shunned; prostitutes who were often just called “sinners”; and others as well. Jesus came to be neighbor to them all; to be Savior for them all.

It’s interesting to note that in Luke’s Gospel before critical milestones in Jesus’ earthly life and ministry, Jesus spends time in prayer, beginning with his baptism as we are told: **“and when Jesus also had been baptized, and was praying...”** (Luke 3:21). So also, before calling the twelve apostles, Jesus **“went out to the mountain to pray, and all night continued in prayer to God”** (Luke 6:12). And before his transfiguration, Jesus **“took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his face altered and his clothing became dazzling white”** (Luke 9:28-29). And before his own betrayal, suffering, and death, Jesus entered into a time of intense and agonizing prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: **“And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground”** (Luke 22:44). Jesus’ epiphany, his being manifested and shown forth to the world as the Light of the world, would culminate in his death upon the cross, where he would pray for his executors: **“Father, forgive them, for they**

know not what they do” (Luke 23:34), and at the last, commend himself to the Father in prayer: **“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”** (Luke 23:46). In seeking the Father’s face always in prayer, but especially before critical moments, Jesus manifested a close relationship of obedient love. This is how Jesus became neighbor to us all. Being baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection, being sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are now called to **“walk in newness of life”** (Romans 6:4). We **“must consider [y]ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 6:11). This is why we go back again and again to what God has done for us in Baptism: that we may daily die to sin and rise to new life in Christ.

Jesus was not, as we are, baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus is the sinless Son of God, and so had no sins of which to be forgiven. But Jesus’ baptism set him on a journey – a journey that would take him to death on the cross, and ultimately to resurrection. Our Baptism also sets us on a journey – a life-long walk of faith. We do not know where this journey will take us, or what will be before us along the way. Will there be joy or sorrow? Will there be laughter or tears? Will there be suffering and pain? Will we be overwhelmed by life’s difficulties and challenges, feeling like we are drowning? Or will we be consumed by the adversities of life as though by fire? Life can be like this, and when it is, we hold fast to the Lord’s promise that we heard in today’s Old Testament lesson: **“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...”** (Isaiah 43:1b-3a). Jesus now invites us to join him on his mission in daily life. Jesus invites us to commend ourselves, our time, and our possessions into his hands so that he might use all that we are and have to bless others. In response to what God in Christ has done for us, he now calls us to see all of life as our mission field. God invites us to see Christ in our neighbor – locally here at home as well as globally around the world. As Jesus clearly teaches, whoever needs my help, that person is my neighbor (Luke 10:25-37). Our neighbor may not look like us, dress or act like us. But Jesus says that in helping that person in need – our neighbor – we are in a holy and mysterious way ministering to Jesus himself (Matthew 25: 31-40). Conversely, Jesus also makes clear that when we withhold or refuse help to that person in need, we are failing to see Christ’s face in the face of our neighbor (Matthew 31:41-46). In truth, these actions have eternal consequences and we dare not make excuses. **“Behold, now is the time; behold, now is the day of salvation”** (2 Corinthians 6:2).

In the weeks ahead, we will hear more about opportunities we have to serve our neighbors in Jesus’ Name, both locally and globally. This is Serving Jesus – Living in Community 2016. Claimed by Christ and baptized into his death and resurrection, may the Lord bless the journey ahead for each one of us! Amen.