

Matthew 3:13-17 Then Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John at the Jordan. ¹⁴ But John tried to stop him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?”

¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, because it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John let him. ¹⁶ After Jesus was baptized, he immediately went up out of the water. Suddenly, the heavens were opened for him! He saw the Spirit of God, descending like a dove and landing on him, ¹⁷ and a voice out of the heavens said, “This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, how could John argue with such a description of what they were about to do? **Fulfill all righteousness.** Who of us wouldn’t jump at the chance to do that, to fulfill all righteousness — to do something perfect, not only in our eyes, but in God’s eyes, too? But as sinners living in a sinful world, we know the impossibility of doing that even once in our lives. Those among us we call perfectionists, we don’t call them that because they do anything perfectly, but because they are always pursuing it, yet never attaining that goal. Everything in this world, everything that we do, falls short.

That doesn’t mean there isn’t any good in this world, or in our lives, or in our thoughts, words and actions. But just being good isn’t good enough. At the end of the day, we’ve all been there. The good I wanted to do, maybe there was a sinful attitude behind it. Maybe deep down I just did it for me. Or maybe the *person* I did it for didn’t respond with the level of gratitude I thought they should and sin as always, weaseled it’s way in. One way or another it always does so that as Isaiah said, **all our righteous acts even, are like filthy rags.**

That’s what makes what Jesus said to John not only comforting but it also helps us understand our connection to Jesus through his baptism. Jesus was baptized by John, and not the other way around, “**to fulfill all righteousness.**” For Jesus to be the Savior of all, the one to take away *all* the sins of the world and make the whole world righteous, this baptism had to be done. (pause)

What a time we live in. And you might be thinking of all the negative things we see on the news, the evil and wicked things going on in the world today. And there’s plenty to keep us occupied. But I’m talking about all the things that we live with these days that maybe we take for granted. When I was a kid something like video calls — actually seeing the person you were talking to on the phone was something you only saw in futuristic sci-fi movies. And isn’t it interesting that something like

buying from a catalog — sounds old fashioned — was replaced with being able to go to the mall where all the stores were in one place, but now malls are dying out because more and more people are buying their things online — which is like shopping out of a catalog, but getting many things in just 2 days or less. Along those same lines another blessing of our times, especially for those who have kids, is Walmart pick up and delivery. It’s saves so much time and effort. One thing you have to be aware of though is that if you buy something and they’re out of it, unless you tell them otherwise, they will substitute something else — a different brand or quantity. Sometimes you may want only the brand or quantity you like. You may not want the off brand or generic substitute, so you click the box that says, “Do not substitute.”

So, that word, “substitute,” can sometimes have a negative connotation. We think of slogans for products that say, “Accept no substitute,” as they claim nothing is as good as their product.

At his baptism, God didn’t just revealed Jesus to be our Savior, but also the way in which he would save us — as our *substitute*. There was nothing negative about this substitution. For he was baptized not for his sins, but for ours, for all the sins of the world. That’s why all of the readings this morning described him the same way — as perfectly pleasing to God. From Isaiah: “**Here is my servant whom I uphold; my chosen one in whom I delight.**” And Peter ended his reading about Jesus noting that, “**God was with him.**” And here at the Jordan River God said, “**This is my Son whom I love. I am well pleased with him.**” Of course he was. Jesus had lived every day of his life, from the moment he was conceived, perfectly, so that as God revealed him to be our substitute, he was everything we needed. The lone, *perfect* lamb of God, standing in the Jordan river in the place of every sinner.

So, the same place you and I would stand to begin our journey of faith, Jesus stood there first. How fitting that this is how God would reveal Jesus to the world as the worlds’ Savior, and that’s the means by which he revealed him to each of us — through the water and Word of baptism.

And that was only the start. Jesus presented himself not only as our perfect substitute there at the font, but so that he could be our substitute there on the cross. For Jesus stood before God on his own there in the Jordan River in our place because he knew that we could do no such thing. Our sins separate us from God. To be in his presence, with only *our* thoughts and words and actions to stand on, the verdict is inevitable and

the destiny well-deserved — eternal punishment separated from him in hell forever.

And so, to pay a debt we could never pay, to stand in the white hot anger of God we could never withstand, Jesus was our substitute there too — on the cross, to pay the price of sin not just for us, not just for all believers, but for the whole world. He suffered and died in our place, once again, **fulfilled all righteousness**.

His words from the cross confirmed it when he said, “**It is finished.**” As he hung on the cross, God looked down and saw the sins of the world, and punished him instead of us. All the punishment for sin was exacted so that now, none remains.

And then, what was done with Jesus’ body? It was laid once more in the same place we will one day be laid — in a grave. Had his substitutionary work not been accepted, had Jesus been only in it for himself and paid sin’s price for no one else, God’s anger would not have been stayed, and Jesus would have stayed lifeless in the grave. But you know the story — he rose, he rose, he rose. You know the words — *Christ is risen, he is risen indeed!* So important and dear are those words to us because as our substitute, what happened to Jesus will happen to us. **Because Christ lives, you also will live!**

Don’t underestimate this Sunday. It always gets a little overshadowed by the fact that by this time the Christmas high has faded, Epiphany stole the last of that thunder. But Jesus’ baptism is an important cog in the wheel of our salvation.

A spiritual reminder often attributed to Martin Luther is, “When you wash your face, remember your baptism.” It’s a reminder for when we wake up and start the day with a clean slate, and when we go to bed, a full load of the day’s sins on our minds. But baptism is more than just remembering you’ve been cleansed from sin, as wonderful a reminder as that is. It’s also a powerful and personal reminder of *your* connection to *your* Savior, *your* substitute. As he was washed for the sins he would bear, so *you* have been washed. As he went to the cross and paid the price of the sins of the world, so were *yours* paid in full. As he rose on the third day, *you* too will rise on the last. Jesus has fulfilled all righteousness and baptism is our connection to it.

That’s why we don’t put the font away and bring it out only when there’s a baptism. It’s why we begin every service with the words of baptism: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. They stand as a reminder to all who enter, here is your connection to your Savior. Here is

why you can stand in God’s presence now and confess your sins confident of his forgiveness. As a sinner in a world of sin, you have a substitute. When past sins needle us with guilt, when present sins persist with their temptations, when future sins makes us fearful of the road ahead, here is the solution to sin weaseling it’s way into everything we do: Baptism. Jesus’ and our own, connecting us to him. Here is our strength to live as God has made and sees us — perfect and holy in his sight. Here is the comfort when we fall into sin — Jesus never stumbled, fell, or even wobbled. Here’s our confidence for the future: Everywhere we’ve been and everywhere we go, Jesus was there first, as our perfect substitute. We follow him, knowing where our path will end: at his side in the perfection of heaven forever.

There are many things in our world today that do make our lives easier, and we wouldn’t want to live without them. No where is that more true than when it comes to Jesus, our Savior and substitute, and the grace and mercy of our God revealed to us in his Word. As we leave Christmas and the start of the new year behind, may we look ahead with renewed comfort and hope that we have a Savior who is not only with us all the way, but has gone all the way for us already, from font, to cross, to tomb, making certain our journey from font, to tomb, to heaven by his side forever. Amen!