

January 10, 2016

Luke 3:21-22: ***“Heaven Was Opened”***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It says in Luke 3 [2b-3] that “the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” It is no accident that we find John the Baptist in the wilderness. And the Jordan river is no ordinary river in Biblical history. After leaving Egypt and wandering in the wilderness for forty years, it was at the Jordan where the people of Israel crossed over and entered into the promised land. It says in the book of Joshua:

So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of the harvest), the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, and those flowing down toward the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. And the people passed over opposite Jericho. Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan (Joshua 3:14-17)

Do you get the picture? On one side of the Jordan river was the wilderness. On the other side was the promised land. On one side is death and hell, and on the other side is life and heaven. The Jordan river was literally “the line” that separated the two. Now, for those of you who may not understand the significance of the ark of the covenant, let me begin by saying that you need to rub out of your mind all those thoughts that you might have of the first Indiana Jones movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. God had commanded the people in the book of Exodus to construct the ark of the covenant to represent his presence among the people. Again, when the priests who are carrying the ark of the covenant reach the water, the water divides the river, or the obstacle, that would prevent the people from crossing over from the wilderness to “the land flowing with milk and honey.”

What we read in our gospel lesson and what we are to understand from the book of Joshua is all about our Crossing Over from Death to Life. Heaven is to be opened. The obstacle is to be removed. This crossing over was designed by God to teach the Israelites of what was coming, and today it makes our hearts more certain of what has come in Jesus Christ. It was designed to be a teaching tool that would picture the day of our leaving the wilderness of sin, death, and the devil behind and entering into heaven. John makes the people come out to him, and here - at the Jordan - they are to return to their roots. He states it in this way, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

Once again, Israel is gathered at the banks of the Jordan river. This time it is not Joshua leading them, but John the Baptist. And, there at the banks, are all those who are sinful human beings who do not deserve God’s favor. They are sinners gathered there having been called to repentance by the thunderous voice and preaching of this man by the name of John. His words had cut them to the heart, revealing their

deepest, darkest shames and secrets. They were in the wilderness of sin, death, and the devil as all of us are in this same wilderness. And how can any escape that wilderness?

As the ark of the covenant causes the waters of the Jordan to divide and pave the way to the promised land, so when Jesus steps into the Jordan river and is baptized, heaven is opened! Jesus, who is the ark of the New Testament, the Word made flesh, God dwelling with His people, steps into the Jordan. Only this time, it is not the waters of the river that are split open and torn asunder! In Jesus, our gospel lesson tells us - Heaven is opened.

And so, the Baptism of Jesus is no small thing that we celebrate this day. Although Luke uses few words to describe the scene, don't let the simplicity fool you for a second. What happened at the Jordan that day has great implications for you and me. Crossing through the waters from death to life should be the most important thing to all of us because we have not only been born in the wilderness of sin, but we live in it everyday and have nothing to look forward to but the greater heat of hell. Our sins against God have brought us here, and there is no escape.

Like John the Baptist what can we possibly say to Jesus? We have nothing to say but "I need to be baptized by you . . ." This really is the heart of repentance. It is the realization that we have sinned against the living God and there is nothing that we can do to somehow make it better. The only one who can make it better is Jesus with whom the Father is well-pleased. Only the perfect one can become sin for us. Only the perfect one can somehow reach us with his perfection and divide the waters of hostility so that we may cross over.

Because you and I have been born in the wilderness of sin and death we are desperate for water that will clean us and quench our spiritual thirst. The desert is a desert of hopelessness, and even as Christians we find ourselves battling with doubts about God's goodness, his plans, and his ways in our lives. When things don't live up to our expectations, we grumble and think that we deserve better. And, we don't just live in this wilderness of sin and death, we are a part of it - it is in us. Yes! We are sinners through and through who have broken the law (the love) of God. But, as the voice of John the Baptist calls each of us to repentance, and as we see the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, we are brought to the truth that there is the Savior who rescues us. There is the Savior who is baptized with a baptism that is designed for sinners, even though he is without sin, in order that we might understand that he becomes sin for us to take away our sins and cause heaven to open. In the baptism of Jesus we discover that God has come to rescue us from our living in the wilderness of sin and death.

Jesus takes everything that he has done in his baptism and gives it to us. One of the ways in which he gives it to us is through the sacrament of baptism. We are the sinners who need to have our sins taken away. Jesus takes them away by becoming sin and carrying it all to the cross where he nails it there so that our sin will die and we will rise with him. He takes his death and resurrection and gives it to us in the waters of baptism and sustains that baptism in our lives in confession and absolution. We are connected to him and he is connected to us, like the priests who carried the ark of the covenant. As soon as the feet of the priests who were carrying the ark reached the water, the water divided.

And so, as Jesus is baptized for you and me, he makes baptism what it is. He empowers the baptism that he gives to his church by putting himself in it. Therefore, when we are baptized it is no empty ritual or merely an outward washing of dirt, but it is a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ himself, and a real washing away of all our sins. All the sin that is ours becomes his and all that is his righteousness becomes ours. He takes our wickedness and gives us his perfection. He takes our death and gives us life. He takes our wilderness and gives us heaven. Being baptized into the name of Jesus means that when the Father looks at you and me he says the same thing that he said on the day of our Savior's baptism, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Martin Luther asks the question in his *Small Catechism*: "How can water do such great things?" And the answer says: "Certainly not just water, but the Word of God in and with the water does these things." Indeed, it is Jesus in the water that does these great things for us. In him, and in him alone, heaven is opened!

Now, that doesn't mean that everything is going to be heaven down here in this messed up unbelieving wilderness of a world. But, it does mean that in the midst of all that happens in this wilderness, you can always rest secure knowing that you have already passed over from death to life with Jesus your Savior. Soon enough, the time will come when we will leave this parched land behind to live with Jesus in his promised land and the water that flows forever. Until then, he is with us always until the end of the age. He is with us in our baptism. And in our baptism he says, "I love you, I will give you strength to die and rise with me, you are a child of God, and God is no longer angry with you! Heaven is opened!"

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott