

The Baptism of Our Lord (Epiphany 1C), January 10, 2010  
Church of the Reformation—Lutheran, Affton, MO  
Text: Luke 2:15-17, 21-22

## Identity Theft

Identity theft has been designated one of the greatest crimes of present society. Identity theft has made for a whole lot of new businesses of security and safety. But is identity theft all that new? Hasn't it been around since the third chapter of Genesis (3:5) when the serpent said, **“You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.”** And so began our theft of God's identity, our thinking that we are God and are in charge of our lives. That identity theft continued until the day when God sent His Son to the earth to be identified with us human beings to redeem us, to give us an identity not as God, but as children of God. So identity—the identity of Jesus—is what this day is all about.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all point the identity question to Jesus' baptism, the event that begins the Gospel, the good news of Jesus the Christ. Mark makes the baptism the beginning of the Gospel. Luke thinks the baptism of Jesus is so important that he circles the day on the calendar: **“In the fifteenth year of reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.”** Which means that all this really happened.

The baptism of our Lord is a “Theophany”—a manifestation of God—the day the Father's voice was heard from heaven, the Spirit descended bodily in the form of a dove, as the Son was in the

water being baptized along with all sorts of sinners. Here is where Luke makes known us the identity and work of Jesus. Who is this Jesus—the one conceived of a Virgin, born in Bethlehem, proclaimed by angels, adored by shepherds, worshipped by wise men? The Father’s voice and the Spirit’s descent testify that this is the beloved Son of God, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ. His mission is to stand in the place of sinners, to take Adam’s place, to die and rise so that all of humanity might die and rise in Him and with Him, to open heaven so sinners might have communion with God.

The baptism of Jesus is His public inauguration into office, like a president or governor. It is also His ordination, as we do with pastors. Jesus’ baptism set Him apart, marking Him as the unique Son of God. For no one else did heaven open. On no one else did the Spirit descend in a visible, bodily form. For no one else did the Father’s voice testify from heaven, **“You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased.”**

Isaiah (42) spoke of Jesus’ baptism long before it happened: “Behold My Servant, whom I uphold, My chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put My Spirit upon Him.” God’s promise through Isaiah identifies Jesus as God’s elect Servant-Son, chosen from all eternity to be the world’s Savior. And here in the Jordan at the right time the Father opens heaven and the Spirit descends on Jesus, just as the Spirit hovered over the waters of creation and later soared over the waters of the Flood. Now descending on Jesus, He is not only identified, but also in Him the new creation has come. God is making all things new again.

But for who’s benefit was the Father’s voice heard and the Spirit’s descent seen? Not for Jesus—He knew who He was. Jesus had no need to be anointed by the Spirit; it’s for us, not for Jesus.

Had we been there that day at the Jordan River, we would not have known Jesus from Adam.

Even John the Baptist admitted, **“I myself did know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God”** (John 1:33).

Luke makes a point of telling us that **“when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened.”** That did not happen for anyone else that John baptized; only for Jesus. Adam’s sin and ours have shut heaven tight, but Jesus, praying out of His own baptism, opens heaven for us. He alone holds the keys to heaven, as He has the authority to open blind eyes, to free captives from prison, and to release the dead from the dungeon of death.

The redemption of the world begins and ends with Jesus, the Son sent by the Father. The Father is well pleased with Jesus. The same cannot be said about you or me. Only Jesus is the Beloved Son, and in Him you and I are also loved. Jesus is the chosen Servant and in Him you are I are also chosen. That is His identity and ours.

In His baptism the work of Jesus is also revealed—He is to be the stand-in Substitute, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world in His death. Jesus was baptized along with all the people, with everyday sinners who had come to John to wash away their sins. The problem is that Jesus had no sins to wash away. John’s baptism was a sinners’ baptism, one of repentance into the forgiveness of sins. Yet, here the sinless Son of God standing before John is baptized like a sinner in the company of sinners. Jesus came to be our sin, even though He was conceived and born without the sin of Adam. Yet here in the Jordan Jesus takes a bath in our sin, immerses

Himself in our death, and turns that putrid, polluted water into the sweet, cleansing water of Baptism by His own dying and rising. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians (II,5:21): **“For our sake [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”**

Jesus stood in our place—He “stole” our identity—so that we might stand in His place before God on the Last Day, perfect, holy, and justified. In His baptism, His death and resurrection, Jesus soaked up every bit of our evil, hatred, and malice, every act of immorality, anger, falsehood, murder, lust, theft, gossip, disobedience, greed, envy, and pride. Jesus took the sin of every last sinner, steeped them all into His own perfect and sinless body and then nailed it to death on His cross. What is the worst thing you have ever done, the worst thing of which you are ashamed, the thing for which you fear God’s judgment? Now be assured that it has all been washed away and buried in the death of Jesus once and for all. “It is finished.”

Make no mistake here: We are not baptized because Jesus was baptized. His baptism is utterly unique, because Jesus is utterly unique. God has only one Son. But Jesus did come with a greater Baptism than that of John’s, a Baptism with wind and fire of the Holy Spirit, a Baptism of His cross and resurrection, laying the foundation for our Baptism, in which we are united with Jesus in His perfect life and death. He gives us a new identity—His. That means that what Jesus accomplished on the cross for the whole world, comes splashing down on you in your baptism. Jesus was baptized into our sin and death, so that we might be baptized into His death and life. You have been crucified with Christ; buried with Him; raised with Him; glorified in Him. You no longer live; Christ who lives, lives in you, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. Evidence? You are baptized.

In Christ we have a new identity—not one stolen, but given by Him who has purchased us with His own blood and death and resurrection. That new identity is that of children of the heavenly Father.

Henry V. Gerike