

## *God's Wrath and God's Delight*

Sermon on Luke 3.15–22 for The Baptism of Our Lord C on January 13, 2019  
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

*In the name of the Father and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Today, Isaiah has us passing through water, Paul has us going down into water and coming back up, Luke tells us that people were baptized with water, and that Jesus, too, was baptized with water. So, there is water all over the place this morning. At a basic level, we can look at all that water and say that God uses created stuff to get stuff done. God works through means. He does not deal with us directly. If He did, we would not survive the fire of His wrath and displeasure. So, it is *grace* that God uses means, His undeserved, unmerited favor. It is grace that He uses water to deal with us.

We don't like grace, though. We don't like to give it, that is, we don't like to give people what they do not deserve. We prefer clean-cut, clear justice. How about the Jake Thomas Patterson? What does He deserve for abducting Jayme? It's just easier if good people get good things and bad people get bad. It's our pride and desire for control that thinks that way. And it's that same pride that doesn't like to receive grace. We like to get what we deserve and earn what we get. We don't want to have rely on anybody for anything, let alone be completely dependent on them for life. Our two-year-old says, "Lily do it." The ninety-two-year-old has the same attitude. It's just human pride.

Human pride would rather not receive God or God's grace on God's terms, that is, through water. There's got to be another way to relate to God, something more meaningful and authentic than a ritual washing! What we're really saying is that we want God on our terms. That seems more solid and meaningful than His water, but we never know where we stand that way. We only have our conjecture, feelings, and experiences, but none of it will be concrete and final. Is God happy with you? Yes! He is happy with you. He is pleased with you. He loves you. He made you. He bought you back with His own blood. He is working in your life now, even if it is through means. And we can say it that because He says it. His Word is filled with His promises. Believe them. He combines that Word with water and tells you that because He has washed you on His terms, by grace, you are His own, completely clean, adopted and secure in His family. It's grace; God's unmerited, undeserved favor. It's pure gift.

So, God's water gives us a solid foundation today. What does it mean, then, to live on that basis? What does it mean to be saturated with God's water every day? Let's consider the last two verses of our text from Luke chapter three.

Luke says in chapter three verse twenty-one, "*Now when all the people were baptized.*" Why were they baptized by John? John told them to turn from their sins and get clean before God's judgment. It's one thing to confess the dirt. It's another thing to not have any and to get in the water anyway.

*"Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized . . ."* There are two realities that come out of this Baptism of Jesus. First, Jesus is for us. Second, Jesus is with us. Jesus is for us as our substitute. Consider that water. The people had been washed in it. It's like the old days when a whole family would bathe in a basin once a week whether they needed it or not, from oldest to youngest. It was good to be the dad. Jesus chooses to step into that water last. It was less like a family's funk from the week and more like raw sewage from the whole city, the whole world. What besides

grace would move Him to step into that and take our place? He made Himself dirty so He could make us clean.

Are you willing to let Jesus do that for you? Lord, help me let go of myself, my pride, and my attempts to justify myself and make myself look clean. Let me confess that truth and receive the One who comes to take my place. If I continue on my own, there is only God's wrath for me. But Jesus is for me.

Jesus is also with us. Luke doesn't draw a distinction between when Jesus is baptized and when everyone else is baptized. When all the people were baptized, oh yeah, and when Jesus was baptized, too. There's solidarity and unity there. St. Paul echoes the point, "*For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*" (Romans 6.5). In other words, Jesus is baptized so that He can share everything He has with us: His righteousness, His Spirit, and the fact that God delights in Him. How do you know you have any those things? Because you feel it in your heart? Because you know it in your mind? Because God confirms His grace in your experiences? God gives you more certainty than that. You are baptized into Christ. Jesus is for you and Jesus is with you.

Living on the firm foundation of God's water is being confident that Jesus is for you and with you. That's living from and on the basis of God's grace, saturated by His water. But there's more.

After the baptisms, Luke records Jesus praying. It would be easy to miss this, but it shows one simple thing: God and Jesus are close, as a father and a son should be. The alternative is silence, separation, anxiety, wrath, displeasure, and judgement. That's the way we will relate to God apart from Jesus. But baptized into Christ, we have what Jesus has. We have sonship. So, now we pray to a Father who is close to us and who delights in us. God is well pleased with you just as He is well pleased with Jesus.

Then, as Jesus was praying "*the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove.*" Visible peace between heaven and earth hovered over those waters as Jesus was anointed to take on the wrath of God for us. His Baptism, unique from ours, sent Him to the cross to do what only He could do. That's Jesus for us, again. But there is also Jesus with us, here in this anointing. Just as Jesus receives the Spirit, and bears that Spirit in His life, He gives that same Spirit of God to you. You didn't see it, but the heavens opened at your Baptism, too. Invisible peace between heaven and earth hover over you wherever you go and everything you do happens in the presence and power of the Spirit of God. It's why you are here today and why you believe the promises of God. Lord, give me faith to trust in you.

Finally, the highpoint of this little narrative: "*a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased'*". There's the Word that makes the water Baptism. The heavens don't resound with a voice of judgment and wrath, but with the voice of a Father Who is pleased that His Son is *for* sinners and *with* sinners. This is why He sent Him, to open heaven and rain down His grace on you. God is not angry with you, although you're certainly deserving. He poured His wrath out on Jesus instead. Now the fire of God's wrath is gone for you. Now, God has grace for you, unmerited, undeserved favor, pleasure, and delight. It is pure gift.

To live our lives on the basis of this water, both at Jesus' Baptism and at yours, to live from the concrete certainty of His abundant grace is to believe that Jesus is for us and with us, to pray with confidence as dear children approach their dear Father, to live at peace with God as temples of the Holy Spirit, and to know for certain that God is pleased with us now and forever. It's true because God says it and the Word of the Lord endures forever. So, to live saturated by God's water is look ahead and know that "*just*

*as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too [will] walk in newness of life”* (Romans 6.1–11). May God send His Spirit to keep us grounded and saturated in His baptismal waters of grace.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## Where is He?

Sermon on Matthew 2.1–12 for The Epiphany of Our Lord on January 6, 2019  
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Location. Location. Location. It's always important. But it's ambiguous in our Gospel Lesson. Where exactly is Jesus in Matthew chapter two? That's what the Magi want to know. They started in "the east," they followed a star, they came to Jerusalem, and they asked, "Where is He?" The answer came from Micah: Bethlehem. That's the right birthplace, but that's not where Jesus stayed, that's not where Jesus was, and that's not where the Magi go to find Him. They actually ignored the answer from the chief priests and scribes and instead followed that miraculous star that led them to a little house in Nazareth.

Matthew chapter two does not map this out, but Luke chapter two really helps. Luke also says that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (2.4), but goes on to say that when He was eight days old, He was circumcised and named (2.21). Then, when the time came for Mary's purification, the whole family traveled from Bethlehem to the temple in Jerusalem to present Jesus to the Lord (2.22). That's where Simeon and Anna enter the narrative. After that, Luke writes this: *"And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him"* (2.39–40).

Note the timeline. Jesus is born. The star appears. The Magi see it and start packing their bags. The Holy family travels to Jerusalem sometime after Jesus was eight days old and then travel back home to Nazareth. All the while, the Magi are making their way from the east. So, for a while, we have two parties traveling at the same time and converging in Nazareth sometime before Jesus was two years old.

But Matthew isn't explicit about any of that and that's by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So, there's some divinely inspired and intentional ambiguity about Jesus' location. Hence the question: Where is He? By this ambiguity, the Spirit invites us to plop ourselves down on the back of a camel and join those westward proceeding mapless Magi. What was their guide? The star, the whole star, and nothing but the star. Their wisdom, if they had any at all, was their humility to actually follow that star. They made themselves blind and deaf to everything else, even the voices in Jerusalem that quoted sacred Scripture. They didn't know where Jesus was, but the point of Matthew's Gospel is that *God* led them right to Him.

*"Truly, you are a God who hides Himself,"* Isaiah says (45.15). So, we find ourselves with those Magi. Aside from the very important fact that they are Gentiles, like us, and therefore represent the mystery Paul would discuss years later that the Church includes both Jews and Gentiles, and therefore includes us, we also find ourselves with these Magi in their ambiguity. Where is God? Where is He working? What is He up to at this time and place? Our faith is meaningless if the risen Lord Jesus is not present active in this world today. But where is He?

A map would be nice. Instead, we get divinely inspired and intentional ambiguity. Do we have the humility to find Jesus where God leads us or will we consider ourselves wise enough to find Him on our own? We run from place to place looking for any indication of God's activity in our nation, our church body, our congregation, our families, even our own hearts. Truly, He is a God who hides Himself. Except when He doesn't. We do not have a miraculous star, but God has revealed Himself in three places for us. Location. Location. Location.

The first location of God is Jesus. This is exactly what Matthew is talking about when he writes in chapter one, *“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us)”* (1.22–23). God is present with us in the person of Jesus Christ and He shows Himself to us in the life and ministry of Jesus which is recorded in Scripture and continues to this day.

But even that is relatively hidden. Think of the manger, the poverty, the cross. Where is God when Jesus is on the cross? Truly, He hid Himself there. God Himself died there, even as God Himself can never die. God knows pain, suffering, and death. He is present with us in those times and He alone knows how to bring forgiveness, deliverance, and peace.

So, where can we find God? In the crucified Christ. But that was a long time ago and Jesus is not hanging on the cross anymore and we can’t travel to Jerusalem and find Him there. So, there’s a second location.

The second location of God is the Word. The Word is the bridge, the transport, the vehicle that brings Jesus to you and takes you to Jesus. The Word joined the water and carried you to the cross. It transported you to Mount Calvary where you were joined to Jesus. You died with Him and you were raised with Him. Where He is you are and always will be. The Word also joins bread and wine to bring Jesus to you and you into the whole heavenly banquet with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. *“Thou spreadst a table in my sight; Thine unction grace bestoweth; And, oh, what transport of delight From Thy pure chalice floweth”* (LSB 709). God leads us to Himself in a miraculous way if we are humble enough to follow it, blind and deaf to everything else.

So often, and I mean daily, we’re looking for God to manifest Himself in some other way outside of and apart from His Word. We want to see Him in the hospital room, the court room, and the living room. It’s not that He isn’t there. It’s that He doesn’t deal with us directly there. He hides Himself. He does not want to be found in those ways. But, like that star, that one light that reached those few Magi and led them to one little house so far from their own, our God epiphanies in the light of His Word. It’s written, spoken, sacramentally enacted, and it’s Jesus Himself. So, let’s resolve in the New Year to have the humility to look for and find God where He has promised to be and let’s have the wisdom to be blind and deaf to all the other voices around us and even in us.

But, speaking of “in us,” there is a third location of God. It’s you, the Church. Now, this gets tricky and a little dangerous. We can’t be sure about what’s going on in us, let alone in other baptized children of God, but that does not mean God isn’t there. *“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God”* (1 Corinthians 6.19). The Spirit lives in you to make Jesus known through you. That’s why we’re having a Bible class on evangelism. The Spirit does not work apart from the Word. So, like the prophets of old, the Spirit puts His words in you and uses your words and your actions to lead others to Jesus. As Paul says in the Epistle Lesson, *“through the Church the manifold wisdom of God”* is made known (Ephesians 3.10) and as Isaiah says to those whose Light has come, *“nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising”* (Isaiah 60.3). God has manifested Himself to you and led you to Jesus. Where and when will He lead others through you?

Where is God? He’s in Jesus, His Word, and His Church, until that Final Day when He comes again to take us to be where He is in that place He has prepared for us. *“He will one day, oh, glorious grace, Transport us to that happy place Beyond all tears and sinning! Amen! Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! Crown of gladness! We are yearning For the day of Your returning!”*

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## *What Child Is This? The Child Who Is the Savior*

Sermon on Isaiah 9.2–7, Titus 2.11–14, and Luke 2.1–14 for Christmas Day on December 25, 2018  
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Why is the birth of Jesus such good news? Well, the birth of a child is a beautiful gift. Many people point that out by calling the birth of a baby a *miracle*. That bugs me a little bit because human birth is technically not a miracle. It happens just the way God created it to happen. A miracle would be something outside of the laws of nature. But, I don't want to be a scrooge and when people say birth is a miracle, I know what they mean. It's an amazing thing, a beautiful gift. It's worthy of celebration.

But Jesus' birth was a miracle. The *virgin* conceived, bore a son, and sang her lullaby to the baby in the manger. Not only that, but the God who is spirit and exists from everlasting to everlasting condescended and confined Himself in a human body. That rewrites *all* of nature's laws. So, if the births of our sons and daughters are worthy of celebration, what do you think we should do when God's Son is born?

But beyond the simple fact that God's Son is born, that God became man, God gives us two more reasons to celebrate today; two more things that make Jesus' birth such good news. First, Jesus did not enter this world empty-handed. Second, Jesus was born to die for us.

First, Jesus did not enter this world empty-handed. St. Paul writes this about everybody else: "*For we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world*" (1 Timothy 6:7). But Jesus is different. He might have appeared naked and empty-handed, just like any other baby, but He was and is God in the flesh full of grace and in His hands He has salvation for all people.

What if He had come to confront humanity? What if He came angry? What if He came with a list of demands in His hands, conditions, requirements? This is how we would have done it. But Jesus is different. He brings good news. His hands bring salvation by grace, that is, as a gift for you.

Second, and more specifically now, Jesus was born to die for us. In other words, He was born to *bring* salvation to the world but He would *give* salvation to the world by dying. Normally parents don't think about their newborn child's funeral. But Jesus is different. The Creator came into His creation to recreate it by dying and rising again. So, right from His birth, His death is in view. He is born to die.

Have you ever noticed how Mary's actions at Jesus' birth sound similar to Joseph of Arimathea's actions at Jesus' death? Mary "*wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn*" (Luke 2.77) Thirty-three years later, Joseph "*took [Jesus' body] down [from the cross] and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid Him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid*" (Luke 23.53). The tidbit we might miss is that feeding troughs were often stone slabs. If that were the case, Jesus' manger would have been reminiscent of Jesus' tomb. He was born to die because of us. He was born to die for us. His hands holding our salvation were opened up for us on the cross.

But if Jesus' body on that stone feeding trough pointed to the same body in a stone tomb, then so does Jesus' merely temporary stay there. He did not stay in the manger or in the tomb. This Child who was born to die lives forever. He is among us today and He does not come empty-handed.

What Child Is This? The One who had a Mary at His birth and multiple Marys at His death. The One who had a righteous Joseph at His birth and a different righteous Joseph at His death. The One who was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger at His birth and was wrapped in a shroud and laid in a tomb at His death. The One who was born to die but who came back to life again so that we might be reborn to eternal life with Him.

Jesus lives today. He enters this place now and extends His nail-scarred hands to give you salvation by giving you Himself, His Body and Blood for you. He was born to die for you and He lives to forgive you and give you life. So, we celebrate Him.

“Haste, haste to bring Him laud,” “Hail, hail the Word made flesh,” “Joy, joy, for Christ is born.”

*In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*