

*NOW WHEN ALL THE PEOPLE WERE BAPTIZED, AND WHEN JESUS ALSO HAD BEEN BAPTIZED AND WAS PRAYING, THE HEAVENS OPENED, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT DESCENDED ON HIM IN BODILY FORM, LIKE A DOVE; AND A VOICE CAME FROM HEAVEN, "YOU ARE MY BELOVED SON; WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED."*

There is a series of commercials for Progressive Insurance that poke fun at the backup quarterback. Maybe you've seen them. They go like this. A man is trying back a trailer into his yard and not having great success, so his wife calls for the backup, Case Keenum, who backs the trailer in with perfection. Or another one which features a man trying to get rid of a wasp nest and only causing problems, so his wife, too, calls for the backup and Colt McCoy puts an end to the wasp nest. Or another in which a frustrated husband is trying to hang a piece of art work in the living room and failing in his efforts, so once again, his wife calls for the backup, Josh Dibs, who hangs the art work with ease. All the commercials end with the tag line, "If only there was a backup in real life."

Today, My Friends, is the Baptism of Our Lord. And the **substitution** in those Progressive commercials helps us understand the Baptism of Our Lord. SUBSTITUTION is the heart of the Gospel. God demands the life-blood of the sinner. But, because God is love, He takes the life-blood of the substitute in the sinner's place.

Satan, with his lies, has caused much confusion about why Christ was baptized. We know from our Small Catechism that baptism forgives sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation. But, our Lord Jesus had no sin; He already reigned over the devil and was not subject to death; He had eternal life. So, why was He baptized by John in

the Jordan River? The reason is as simple as this -- in His baptism, Christ takes our place as our substitute.

Nothing happens in the Bible by chance. The Old Testament looks forward to the cross. Throughout the Old Testament, God was teaching us, comforting us, that His only-begotten Son would be our substitute in death.

God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, the son that he loved. When they were at the place of the sacrifice, the son asked his father, "Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" To which, his father replied in faith, "*God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son*" (Ge 22:8). Abraham, Moses tells us, lifted up his eyes and looked and saw a ram, caught in the thickets. Abraham took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering as the substitute for his son.

When the children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt, Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he would not let God's children go. So, God sent 10 plagues upon the land, the last the worst, most dreaded of all -- every firstborn in the land of Egypt would die. God instructed the head of each household enslaved in Egypt to take a lamb and kill it. Then, they were to take the blood of the lamb and put it on the doorframe of their homes. That night in Egypt, when the angel of death saw the blood and he "passed over" that home, sparing the life of the firstborn. The blood of the lamb was the substitute for the lifeblood of the firstborn of God's children.

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest selected two male goats. He would kill one as a sin offering for the people and bring its blood inside the curtain of the Holy of Holies, sprinkling that blood over the Ark of the Covenant. After that, in the presence of all the people, he would take the other goat, lay both his hands on it, and confess over it all the sins of the people of Israel, thus transferring the sin of the people onto that goat as the

substitute for the people. Then, that goat -- the scapegoat -- was taken into the wilderness, so that the people's sin was not on them anymore.

As He provided a ram for Abraham, the blood of the lamb for the children of Israel in Egypt, and the goats for the Day of Atonement, God has provided a lamb for you. This lamb is His only-begotten Son, who came to us in human flesh at His birth at Christmas. The Apostle Paul writes this, *For our sake, [God the Father] made [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Co 5:21).*

Baptism is all about substitution. At His baptism, Jesus became your substitute. You did not love God nor your neighbor and the wages of that sin is death. God knew you could not save yourself, so He sent His only-begotten Son, born of a Virgin, so save you.

Here's how He did it: The GOOD NEWS of the Gospel is that our sin and all its wages of death was washed upon the Lamb of God. He carried that sin to the death of the cross for you, for your salvation. And, His blood shed on that cross washes away all of your sin and you are forgiven.

The Apostle Paul writes in our Epistle lesson,

*We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His (Ro 6:4-5).*

In your baptism, Christ's death, His resurrection, His victory over the devil, His eternal life, all became yours. In your baptism, Christ's righteousness became your very own righteousness. At His baptism, His Father spoke of Him, *"You are My beloved Son; with you I am well pleased"*

(v. 22). Now, God's view of His Son is His view of you -- you are His child whom He loves and with you He is well pleased.

And in your baptism, you became Christ's substitute. Jesus being the substitute for the sinner and the sinner being the substitute for Christ is the **essence** of the Gospel. By virtue of the new birth of our baptism, we live in Christ and we are Christ to the world. Paul says it this way in our Epistle, *So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Ro 6:11).*

I am going to say this again: substitution is the heart of the Gospel. Because you are baptized into Christ, He lives in you and you live in Him. That means that you His voice, His hands, His feet to all the world. This is what we pray for this Sunday:

"Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River You once proclaimed Him Your beloved Son and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized in His Name faithful in their **calling** to be Your children and the inheritors with Him of everlasting life."

Do you remember how God lead the wise men to the Christ-child? That's right, the light of the guiding star. Now, God gives you to your neighbor. God shines His Epiphany light through you -- so that He may lead your neighbor to Christ through you.

And, as you do the work of Christ, you are not alone. He lives in You. And, He feeds you with His grace as you hear the words of eternal life and as you eat His very Body and Blood, to strengthen you in all godly and holy living. In this way, God **makes** and **keeps** you faithful in your calling to be His child.

As Christ came to do the Father's will, so now you delight in doing the Father's will. God serves your neighbor through you. He shines His Epiphany light through you, to lead your neighbor to Christ.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.