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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
Baptism of Our Lord, Year A
Matthew 3:13-17

Confirmation Youth: The word of the day is righteousness. Listen for what that means and write about how you might be included in God's righteousness.

Let us pray. Grant us, O God, to hear your voice, and in hearing your voice to love your word, and in loving your word to do your will, through Christ our Lord. Amen

Most of us like to be affiliated with one group or another. As we get closer to the end of football season we see more and more team jerseys being worn and social media posts cheering on our favorite teams. (I know Vikings fans are in mourning today. So sorry.)

I've never been into sports much—either playing or cheering on—but I was reminded this week about how the cohort I went to seminary with rallied together around a mascot of sorts.

One of my classmates had a strong background in youth ministry so she made sure we played games when we stayed together on campus for our 2-week intensive classes. One of them was a combination of Pictionary and Telephone. Each person had a piece of paper and we wrote down a phrase or movie title or something like that at the top. Then we all passed our papers to the person on our right who had to illustrate the words we had written.

We'd fold down the paper to cover up the original message and pass it to the next person who had to look only at the illustration the previous person had drawn and write in words what they thought it was.

The papers went around the table until everyone got their own paper back. And, like the whisper in the ear form of the telephone game, what ended up at the bottom of the page was nothing close to what was written at the top.

One of our papers ended up with an illustration of a leprechaun with an electrical cord as a tail. That became our cohort's mascot and we named ourselves the Electric Leprechauns!

It was a silly character but it served to unite us in a way that unique to our group. That identity put us all on an even playing field. Our previous backgrounds and where we lived didn't matter. How we were paying for seminary didn't matter. We were united as a group and that silly little leprechaun drawing made Cohort 3 into more than a group of individual classmates, we were the Electric Leprechauns!

As baptized Christians we are also united around a common identity. We are God's people, a people who are named Children of God and followers of Jesus Christ, who are empowered by God's Spirit to participate in God's saving work in the world.

Baptism is our entrance into this identity as Christians and Jesus leads the way when he comes to the river to be baptized by John. Like John, we might also be surprised that Jesus

wanted to be baptized. John expected Jesus to trade places with him and become the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire, as he had been telling the crowd earlier.

John had been calling people to repent and be baptized. In the other gospels he is more specific about what that means. He tells people, if you have two coats give one away, or share your food with the hungry, or be fair and right in your business dealings.

The call to repentance can mean a call to change our moral thinking and actions. In Matthew's gospel John the Baptist isn't specific about the definition of repentance, but he is clearly calling people to change.

And then Jesus shows up, wanting to be baptized by John, too. What did Jesus have to repent from? Matthew is clear from before Jesus' birth that he is the Messiah, the promised Savior, God's own Son. With John we might wonder, why would Jesus answer the call to repent and be baptized?

But Jesus came to John and said it was proper—necessary—for John to baptize him, “to fulfill all righteousness.”

In Matthew's gospel we will hear the word righteousness again and again. In this gospel whenever we hear the word righteousness our ears should perk up that this isn't just about making New Year's resolutions to change our habits. Righteousness is about restoring relationships.

To be righteous in Matthew's gospel is to be in a right relationship with God, which turns our hearts to live in right relationships with our neighbors.

Righteousness causes us to change how we live, but we can only live in righteous ways when we are first in right relationship with God.

Jesus came to the river that day to be baptized, “to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his ministry to make a right relationship with God possible for all who would come to believe in him...ALL people.

When Jesus entered those waters, he united himself with all those who came seeking deliverance—the rich and the poor, the weak and the powerful, the respectable and the outcast.

In his baptism, Jesus submits to God's ultimate purpose for him—to save people from their sins, as the angel told Joseph before Jesus was born. Jesus did not need to be cleansed from the sin that separates humanity from God, but in his baptism he rejects the power sin would have over him.

When Jesus rose out of those waters he began his mission to fulfill God's righteousness. This mission was God's work to overpower the sin and death that keep us from a full and loving relationship with God.

Jesus will not accomplish this act of salvation on his own. As he came up out of the water the Spirit of God descended on him and God the Father declared, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Jesus sets out from this event of being named and empowered by God to meet humanity where they are, in their hurts and struggles, in their questions and confusion, in their joys and sorrows. Jesus’ mission and ministry are accomplished in relationships.

Knowing who Jesus is, and his mission of God’s reconciliation with all creation, we need to consider the purpose of our own baptisms.

As baptized Christians we may not wear team jerseys and we don’t have funny little mascots to rally around. We are united by Jesus Christ. He came to the world to be joined with humanity, to share all that this human life holds—the joys and the sorrows. He came to overcome the powers of sin and death so that nothing would ever separate us from the love of God.

We, too, have risen from the waters of baptism where we were named and claimed by God to fulfill all righteousness. Holy Baptism gives us each the name, Child of God.

We received the power of the Holy Spirit. From those waters we were joined to Christ’s mission to fulfill God’s righteousness by sharing what we have been given with the world—God’s forgiveness, grace, and love.

That mission includes entering into the suffering and struggles of the world around us, to share the good news of God’s love and grace in both words and actions, so that others might also be reconciled to God and join us in the mission of God we share as God’s people.

Where do we see or experience brokenness in our world today?

How is God calling us to enter into those places to bring God’s righteousness—individually, as families, as a congregation?

How might we participate in God’s reconciling work of restoring relationships so that new life can flourish?

Last week we began the practice of observing a time of silence for reflection and I invite you to ponder these questions before we sing the hymn of the day.

May we embrace our baptismal identities with joy, and enter into our calling to be God’s people of righteousness.

Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Called together through water and the Word, we boldly pray for the church, the world, and all who long to hear God's voice.

A brief silence.

Renewing God, we thank you for the gift of baptism. Give your church claim our mission to fulfill your righteousness in the world. Make us boldness to proclaim your promises so that your word of hope reaches the ends of the earth. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Almighty God, we rejoice in the glory of your creation. Bring restoration to your earth, especially in Australia where wildfires still rage, and in Puerto Rico following devastating earthquakes and aftershocks. Give firefighters and relief workers the resources and strength they need in these days. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

God of peace, we give thanks for those who have heard your call to lead communities, states, and nations. We pray for President Trump and his advisors as they engage in the work of diplomacy, especially with Iran. Send your Spirit to empower wise and compassionate servant leaders so that all experience your reign of peace. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Holy God, thank you for the powerful healing we witness through doctors and nurses, medication, therapy, and holistic means. Break through clouds of pain and anguish with your voice of comfort. Proclaim hope to all who grieve, and send healing to all who are sick especially...**Jessie, Kathie (surgery Tues), Kyle, Rodney** And others we name in our hearts.

pause

Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

God of hope, unleash your Spirit to increase our trust in you. We give thanks for the lives of the saints who inspire us with lives of baptismal witness, especially Mary Allison who died this week. Grant comfort to her family and friends in their grief, even as we place our hope and trust in your promise of eternal life. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We place our prayers before you, God, united in your Spirit; through your beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.