

Baptism of Our Lord C, 2010

Text: Luke 3:15-22

Title: Crossing the Delaware

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It was December of 1776. The war was not going well for the American revolutionaries. They had been on the run, able to avoid defeat, but they needed to win a decisive victory to turn the tide of the war. Washington and his generals decided to plan a daring attack on Trenton, New Jersey. They would surprise the Hessians in the early morning hours of December 26, as they were still recovering from their Christmas celebrations.

Washington needed to move his army from Pennsylvania to New Jersey. To get to Trenton meant a dangerous and daring crossing of the Delaware River. Washington needed to cross the icy river undetected in the middle of the night, if he was to have any chance at victory.

As you know, Washington and his army crossed the Delaware successfully. They surprised the Hessians and won a decisive victory. This improved morale and helped begin to turn the tide of the war.

The crossing of the Delaware was made famous in a painting by Emmanuel Leutze. I'm sure that you've seen it. The painting shows the boats struggling to cross the river. The soldiers are straining at the oars, trying to avoid the chunks of ice. In Washington's boat two soldiers are struggling to keep the American flag upright, in the face of a mighty wind. In the distance, dawn is starting to break. And there, in the bow of the boat stands George Washington, his sword at his side, his head held aloft, and his gaze firmly fixed on the other side of the river.

Crossing the Delaware was a turning point, a foundational moment in American history. It pointed to victory, freedom and independence.

For the Israelites, it was not the crossing of the Delaware, but the crossing of the Jordan River. The people had wandered in the wilderness for forty long years. The entire generation that had left Egypt had died in the wilderness. After forty years it was finally time to cross the Jordan River and enter into the promised land. They would leave slavery and death behind and enter into a land of peace and prosperity. When the people of Israel crossed the Jordan River they crossed from death into life.

It was no accident that John came preaching in the wilderness, and that he baptized people in the Jordan River. The location was very important.

But first, a brief word about baptism itself. John was not the first to baptize. What made John's baptism different was that he baptized Jews. Baptism was part of the ritual used when Gentiles converted to Judaism. For you to be baptized as a Jewish person, you were saying that you had become like a Gentile, you were outside of the people of God, and you needed to be brought back in.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. People came, confessing their sins and receiving forgiveness through baptism.

Now you don't need a river to baptize. Plenty of ceremonial washings took place in the temple every day. You just need a large basin and some water.

So why the Jordan River and why the wilderness?

Remember the importance of Jordan River in the history of Israel. Crossing the Jordan was crossing from the wilderness to the Promised Land, it was crossing from death to life.

As Israelites went out into the wilderness, they were retracing the steps of their ancestors. They were leaving the Promised Land, their home, and going back to wilderness, the place of wandering and death. The wilderness is where the Lord punished His people for not trusting in Him.

They needed to repent, and to physically enter once more into the promised land, and the place to do so was the Jordan River.

In their baptism, the people came back to the wilderness as a confession of sin. They were both physically and spiritually in the wilderness. As they confessed their sins, they were brought through the Jordan River and back to the promised land. They were brought from the place of death to the place of life and blessing.

What is most strange is that Jesus also comes to be baptized. The way that Luke puts it, Jesus is just one of the crowd. Everyone is coming to be baptized, and Jesus comes, too.

You may wonder, why? Why is Jesus coming to be baptized? He hasn't committed any sins. He doesn't need to repent. Why does He go out to the wilderness and back through the Jordan River?

John is confused, too. In Matthew, we read of a conversation between Jesus and John. John doesn't want to baptize Jesus. Instead, John wants Jesus to baptize him.

The question is answered with the voice from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, in Him I am well-pleased."

Jesus was not the first one to be called the Son of God. In the Old Testament, Israel, the people of God, as a whole, are called His Son.

Israel is the Son of God. When God brings His people out of Egypt, He does so as a Father bringing home His Son. In Hosea the Lord says, "Out of Egypt I have called my Son."

But Israel was a disobedient son. God's son turned his back on his Father and rebelled. Israel was a failure as God's Son.

And so God sent another Son, His own flesh and blood, to be the Son that Israel had failed to be.

In Jesus Christ, we see God's perfect Son. Here is a Son that God can be proud of. Jesus Christ lives the history of Israel the way that Israel should have.

Imagine if George Washington and his army had crossed the Delaware and then lost the battle. Imagine if they had all been defeated and died. What would need to happen next? Someone else would have to take their place, and try again. If Washington had failed, we would need a new general and a new army to fight against the enemy.

The people of Israel failed. They disobeyed the God their Father and lost terribly. So God sent someone new, His own Son, Jesus Christ. With His baptism, Jesus begins His public ministry, He begins His battle against the forces of sin, death and Satan.

And Jesus wins. He is victorious over all His enemies. He casts out demons, He heals the sick, He forgives sins, He dies and He rises. Jesus wins the victory.

The cool part is that Jesus includes us in His victory. When you were baptized, you were joined to Jesus Christ.

Baptism puts you in the boat with George Washington, so that you share in His victory.

But better yet, baptism puts you in the water with Jesus, so that God's voice now speaks about you. You are God's Son, you are His daughter. The Holy Spirit descends on you, too.

Baptism puts you on the cross with Jesus, so that you die with Him.

Baptism puts you in the empty tomb with Jesus, so that you rise with Him.

Listen once more to Paul's words to us from today's epistle:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We 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.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

The baptismal font is your Delaware, your Jordan River. This is where you crossed from the wilderness to the promised land, from death into life. You were joined to Jesus Christ- His death and His resurrection here in Holy Baptism.

Through this crossing you have won something greater than independence from the British or a land flowing with milk and honey. You have become a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem