Luke 3:21-22 When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven; ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’

I suppose now is as good a time as any to talk briefly about the sacraments and what they are for us as Christians. The first thing I want to emphasize is the marks or signs of a sacrament. In order to grasp where these signs have come from, you need to understand that Christians have carefully studied all those things that have been declared sacraments and they have made three conclusions concerning sacraments. Those three conclusions are important because they help us determine what is and isn’t a sacrament! The three marks of a sacrament are: 1. Sacraments are instituted by Christ. 2. Sacrament have earthly elements clearly used and connected to a command and promise of Christ. 3. Sacraments clearly offer the forgiveness of sins and thus eternal life and salvation. In view of all of this, the church early concluded that there were two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

There is no doubt that the Lord’s Supper fills all of these marks. Instituted by Jesus on Maundy Thursday there is a clear command to do it. A clear command to eat bread and drink wine, which is his body and blood. And there is a clear promise of the forgiveness of sins attached to the proper eating and drinking of the bread and wine.

There is also no doubt as to the command of baptism for the believers of Jesus. Jesus very clearly commands his disciples **“Go and baptize all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”** So really in one sentence we have the command and the earthly element definitely connected to the Word of God. We baptize, we apply water “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” It is the Apostles who help us clarify that in baptism our sins are washed away and that in this baptism we become intimately connected with Christ’s death and with his resurrection for our eternal salvation. I know some people wrestle with this but clearly the early believers in Jesus carried out this command to baptize on a regular and I would even say, on an adamant level. So for instance, at Pentecost, the birth of the Holy Christian Church, when the people, struck down by the law and uplifted by the message of Jesus risen asked, **“What must we do to be saved?** The answer given was **“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”** We are told that day that 3,000 were baptized and forgiven in the name of Jesus.

As you pay attention to all of this it does help us answer some questions that arise. Do you have to be baptized to be saved? Often when this question is asked people bring up the thief on the cross. Clearly he was promised eternal life but there is no baptism. The answer there is that you need to remember that baptism at the time of crucifixion was not commanded yet. Jesus does not command baptism until his Ascension. So as Christians we carefully answer this way. If you reject baptism because you feel you know better than God that will be a problem. If you believe but do not know that baptism is commanded and is to be done, I believe God will forgive you and allow you to heaven. But I would say for all those who are believers, since Jesus so commanded, then follow what He says and be baptized! Pretty simple, isn’t it!

Who should be baptized? We think anyone who has sin. If you can die, you need baptism! The examples of Scripture tell us again and again that whole households were baptized so as Lutherans we practice infant baptism as a gracious way in which God makes our children His because of His promises, his power and his grace. Since we can find no restrictions on baptism as to age and such, we baptize all who request baptism for themselves or their children. We make no statement for or against those who chose to delay baptism other than to query: Why would you want to delay a gracious gift of God for our souls?

Then comes that question that arises because of today’s event. The baptism of Jesus. Notice I had said beforehand that we baptize anyone who has sin. Jesus had no sin. Why was Jesus baptized? Let’s look at what we know and contemplate all that was being declared in this interesting history of the baptism of Jesus.

So I will start by asking this question, “Was the baptism of John a sacrament?” Remember our rules for a sacrament. Instituted by Christ. An earthly element connected with and used by God’s command. Offers and gives the forgiveness of sins. By my calculations we are missing at least two of these marks of a sacrament. This baptism was not instituted by Christ and we don’t have any clear word connected with John’s baptism. On the basis of that, we must conclude that John’s baptism was not a sacrament but was rather a symbolic washing that was carried out to get people to think about and prepare themselves for the coming and revelation of the Christ.

Now there are two things here that I like to point to in order to solidify my point. First, did you pay attention to what John said about his baptism? Our text has it. Verse 16 says, **“John answered them all, ‘I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.’”** I want you to notice a few things. First, John says, “I baptize you with water.” Why? The word baptism means “to apply water.” Why does John say, “I apply water with water?” And note that every time John’s baptism is mentioned the Bible says, “baptize with water.” It is because his baptism is only a symbol of what will be. Then he tells you what to really look for, namely the baptism that Jesus will bring about. A baptism that grants the Holy Spirit and the gift of faith. A baptism that sets our hearts on fire for the Lord because God has worked and moved us from death to life, from blind to seeing, from lost to saved. John is telling us the difference between his baptism and the one that we do today.

So then, why is Jesus baptized? In this case I am going to refer you to Matthew and John to grasp what is going on. In the Gospel of John, when the Baptist first sees Jesus coming to him he calls out: **“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me. I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”** Matthew records this conversation as Jesus is presenting himself for baptism. **“But John tried to deter him saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now, it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then John consented.”**

This washing with water is about fulfilling righteousness for Jesus. Jesus is doing what He came to do and that is to live righteously. To be holy and perfect one needs to fulfill every single law of God there could be. Here is what I will tell you. Did you know that every single priest who served at the Temple first had to be washed before he could serve? It is true. Actually it is even deeper than that. In Ex. 29:4 we find this command connected to getting the priesthood, **“Then bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and wash them with water.”** Ex 30:17-21 speaks further of this. Excerpts say: **“Aaron and his sons are to wash their hands and feet with water…whenever they enter the Tent of Meeting, they shall wash with water…when they approach the altar to minister by presenting an offering made to the Lord by fire, they shall wash their hands and feet…this is to be a lasting ordinance…for the generations to come.”** From that day forward every priest who served at the Temple started his day off with this washing with water and throughout the day every time a sacrifice was to be made they washed with this water. One of the main features of the Temple was the Great Sea, a large basin of water for the washing of the priests.

Beginning to get the picture? Jesus is the true and real High Priest that all the other High Priest who served represented. They were the shadow and Jesus is the reality. This washing with water of Jesus was done to mark Jesus as a priest, the true High Priest of the Most High God, to mark Him ready for service and ready to take on the ministry of the Lord for the people. From this point forward Jesus would do what every High Priest was all about: he would represent the people before God. But instead of offering up sacrifice after sacrifice for sins, Jesus offered up one sacrifice, Himself for the sins of the people. Jesus was fulfilling the commands of the Law in this washing with water. He was being marked as special and important in accord with the Law of God.

That all of this is true is attested to in two ways. The lesser testimony is from the Baptist: **“Then John gave this testimony; ‘I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”** Scripture testifies that all of this happened so that God’s Son and our Savior could be revealed.

The greater testimony is from the Lord God. Our text recorded it this way: **“Heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven; “You are my Son, who I love, with you I am well pleased.”** I hope you get the whole picture in your head. As Jesus was praying, following his baptism with water, note that heaven was opened. I believe that means an extraordinary beam of light came to rest on Jesus, a beam of light that everyone saw and noticed. Now, if that had been the only thing you could call it coincidence, but that is not all.

As this beam of light shined on Jesus, next came the Holy Spirit. We are told the Holy Spirit took the bodily form of a dove. That dove flew over, then descended and landed right on Jesus. One thing could be coincidence but two things, that dear people is a miracle and wonder of God. As you contemplate John’s testimony about this everyone who was there saw this. Everyone there grasped that this was of and from God. John grasped the deeper lesson for himself and John understands that Jesus is the Son of God!

The final event was a voice from heaven. I tend to think of this as “the voice.” Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the presence of this voice. Two of them record the voice as saying: **“You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.”** Matthew records almost the same but starts, **“This is my Son…”** Now I don’t know what language the Heavenly Father speaks and I don’t know who was present then and who was not. If the Lord God spoke Hebrew, as I would think he would to Hebrew people, then either translation is possible and valid. But I would think that the point of the words is much more important than anything else.

God the Father identifies and marks Jesus as His Son! Not a Son or one of my boys, but **“My Son.”** I don’t know about you, but God has got my attention here! This is His Son, the promised One, the one who will come to save us from our sins. This is the promised Savior who is going to bring about change, change in the end result of our lives and thus change in the very lives we live. This is momentous, for the Christ, the Savior is revealed!

And God goes on. **“Whom I love.”** At this point, the beginning of Jesus ministry, God the Father attests that Jesus is the object of his love. You want to be the object of God’s love then make sure you have Jesus in your life and heart. Because the way to get the love of God is through and in Jesus. I would also like to point out to you that near the end of Jesus’ ministry God the Father will again speak and repeat the same truth. God loves Jesus and Jesus now becomes the source of God’s love for us. Isn’t that the point of John 3:16? **“God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son…”**  Romans 5:8 says, **“God demonstrated his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** And in 1 John 4:9 we hear, **“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only son that we might live through him.”** Please don’t miss the wonder of God stating his love for Jesus and what it means for us! We are now loved in Jesus!

And then finally, **“With you I am well pleased.”** For the past 30 years Jesus has been obeying the Father, his parents, following each and every law of God, and being tempted in every way just as we are. The Father says, He is pleased, not just pleased but “well pleased” Jesus has met the standard of God. In case you are wondering, the standard is: **“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** That’s Jesus. He has earned in every way the pleasure and delight of God. That is important for us to know because it is Jesus who will serve as our substitute, Jesus who will make atonement for us, Jesus who will serve as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Now go back to what John declared, **“Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”** Here is God himself pointing to our perfect Savior, pointing to the fact that the plan of salvation, the saving of our souls is being accomplished in Jesus and his marvel.

So here is the bottom line. Jesus Christ the Son of God in this baptism is revealed and sealed as the Son of God and the promised Savior from sin. He is revealed as holy and flawless in this duty and now is ready to begin his service as our great High Priest. The message is clear. You have a Savior. It is Jesus. Marvel at what the Lord has given us, because in Jesus our sins are forgiven and our salvation is made sure. Amen.