

To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord

Lutheran Service Book 406/407 | study by Todd A. Peperkorn

Introduction

As Luther sat down to write the preface for the Small Catechism, he reflected on what he found as he visited Evangelical (now called Lutheran) parishes throughout Germany. This is what he wrote:

The deplorable, miserable condition that I discovered recently when I, too, was a visitor, has forced and urged me to prepare this catechism, or Christian doctrine, in this small, plain, simple form. Mercy! Dear God, what great misery I beheld! The common person, especially in the villages, has no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine. And unfortunately, many pastors are completely unable and unqualified to teach. <This is so much so, that one is ashamed to speak of it.> Yet, everyone says that they are Christians, have been baptized, and receive the holy Sacraments, even though they cannot even recite the Lord's Prayer or the Creed or the Ten Commandments.

They live like dumb brutes and irrational hogs. Now that the Gospel has come, they have nicely learned to abuse all freedom like experts. (*Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. [CPH, 2006], 313)

As a result of this, Luther wrote his catechisms. He also wrote a series of hymns on the six chief parts. Our hymn for today, "To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord," is one of these hymns.

- Who is Luther chiefly criticizing in his introduction above?
- Why did Luther employ music?
- What do we use music to learn today?

Exploring the Scriptures

There are two chief texts that Luther uses as the basis for this hymn. Read Matt. 3:13–17. In the Matthew account, Jesus speaks about His Baptism as a fulfillment of all righteousness. Matthew uses the word "immediately" to describe the Spirit descending upon Jesus like a dove.

- What does it mean "to fulfill all righteousness"?
- Why does Matthew emphasize the relationship between Jesus' Baptism and the coming of the Spirit with the word "immediately"?

Read Matt. 28:16–20. Jesus is just about to ascend into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. The disciples

have seen Him rise from the dead, but even now, some doubt. Jesus then says to them, literally, "having gone, make disciples of all the nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to keep/guard everything that I have commanded to you, and behold, I am with you all the days, to the end of the age."

- What are the two parts to making disciples according to Jesus?
- What is the relationship between Baptism and Jesus being with us to the end of the age?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

This hymn was written around 1540/1541 by Martin Luther, and is the sixth and final of his "Catechism Hymns," centered on the six chief parts of the Small Catechism. Luther's hymns were particularly didactic (teaching-oriented), as he saw himself first and foremost as a teacher and preacher of the faith. His hymns often read like mini-sermons, with the ebb and flow of Law and Gospel prevalent throughout. This hymn is no exception.

- Do we still need didactic (teaching) hymns like this today? Why or why not?

- What are the chief doctrines about Baptism that need to be taught today? Why?

Text

Stanza 1 of the hymn paints the picture of our Lord at the Jordan River, and echoes the language of the Scriptures that talk about Baptism as a washing (Titus 3:5), death in Christ (Rom. 6:3–4), and new life (2 Cor. 5:17).

- Why does it please the Father for Jesus to come and be baptized?

- What is the connection between Jesus' death and Baptism in this stanza?

In stanza 2 Luther talks about Baptism as a token. He ties Baptism to faith and His Word. Remember again Luther's words from the Small Catechism: "*What is Baptism?* Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God's command and combined with God's word" (LSB, 325).

- Why is it so important to understand that Baptism is combined with God's Word?

He then talks about the Holy Spirit giving us kinship in Baptism (st. 2). The Holy Spirit makes us family through the token of Holy Baptism!

- Why does Luther call Baptism a "token"? Is this another way of saying "symbol," or does it mean something else?

- What does it mean to be a part of the family of God? How does that change your relationship with God?

Notice in stanza 4 how Luther moves from Jesus standing in the water to us standing in the water. Jesus stands in the water and extends His grace.

- What are the words in this stanza that describe what God does to us and for us?

Stanza 6 is a stern warning against despising Baptism. In some respects it seems out of place, but it shows the consequences for throwing away God's grace.

- To whom is this stanza written?
- How does this continue to teach us about the gifts of Holy Baptism?
- What role does faith play in Holy Baptism?

Making the Connection

This hymn is not merely teaching about something that God does. It actually preaches to us what God has done in Christ through Holy Baptism. As we go through each of the stanzas of this hymn, notice the emphasis on how God views us because we are in Christ. Luther was a master of proclaiming Jesus' death and resurrection, *and* how that great work of God is actually delivered to His people.

- As you look through the text of this hymn again, pick out all of the verbs that describe God's action toward us or how God looks at us in Christ. What is the most powerful image for you?
- What are the words Luther uses to describe what we either receive or what we are to do by faith in His Word?

In Closing

- Sing or read together LSB 406/407.

Prayer

Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River You proclaimed Him Your beloved Son and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as Your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Baptism of Our Lord).