

He Came but Not as Expected
Sermon for St. John the Baptist Day
Sermon Text: Matthew 3:13-17



Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus was baptized, immediately He went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on Him; ¹⁷and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

John the Baptist had looked forward to Jesus' coming his entire life. That's why he spared no effort in preparing for Jesus' coming and inviting all people to join him in preparing for Jesus. His whole life was one of preparing for Jesus to come and that already started before his birth when he leaped for joy to greet Maria, the mother of Jesus. Later in life, he did nothing else but be there for Jesus. He certainly didn't always make it easy for himself: he made his home in the desert and nourished himself with locusts and wild honey. He was also not afraid to denounce evil and hypocrisy, even if it didn't make him popular. That's why in the end, he was executed. But there was one time when John hesitated. Ironically, it was the very day when all his wishes and his life's work were about to come true. It was the day when Jesus actually appeared before him. When Jesus came, John didn't just hesitate – he probably would have preferred to drop everything, go to a solitary place in the desert, hide under his garment of camel hair, and never come out again. The reason for John's doubt was that when Jesus appeared, it was so different from what he had imagined it to be. John had imagined a baptism of fire! Justice that would rain down from heaven! A completely new world without evil! All of this was to be fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. And then Jesus actually came. And what did He do? He wanted to submit Himself to the same baptism as sinners. And in the dirty Jordan river of all places! Instead of killing the evildoers, He wanted to make Himself equal to them. He literally immersed Himself in their filth! Jesus comes differently than John expects. Jesus comes differently than how we think He should come.

What does it mean for our lives when Jesus comes? Don't we often find that Jesus comes differently than we had imagined? We imagine that we must strive to be reasonably good so that God can be pleased about our good deeds and will therefore reward us. And if we have a pile of large and small sins, we hope that the good deeds will outweigh the bad deeds so that we can dare to stand before God. But it happens differently than we expect. We don't come to Him. HE comes to us. And He goes to where the problem is and isn't ashamed to talk to us about our sins and weaknesses. We don't always want to put up with all of this. Jesus must really convince us that His way is the correct one. Jesus had to persuade John and Jesus said something like this to him: "John, you expected a baptism of fire and justice that rained down from heaven. You imagined that I had to be different. In a way, you're right and your ideas aren't that wrong. But you haven't yet grasped what must happen before all of that... to fulfill justice, the path must first go down into the depths. I must become like one of you. I must stand in the place of sinners."

Just like Jesus must convince John, He also has to convince us: "You people expect God to be pleased with your good deeds. This desire is not new, it is ancient. As old as the first people themselves. That's why the desire is in your genes, so to speak. The desire is this: everything should be okay and things

should get better for us. 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' This means something like, everything will be OK. That's a hard path that you, as human beings, can't go down. That's why people have not only long since lost the desire for good things but have also lost sight of what that means. That's why you search so desperately for things and people that can comfort you and yet you just don't find any comfort. My point is not to dismiss all your hopeless attempts to please God. My point is also not to trample or hurt you with My righteousness. All I care about is being with you, no matter what, always. That's why I give away My righteousness, I'm giving it away just like that, and placing Myself on your side. When I say this, it's not because I consider My righteousness as some cheap thing that I can simply throw out a window. No, My righteousness is expensive, precious, and was painful to give, costing Me My body and life! That's why I want it to go exactly where I want it to – with you!"

Jesus always comes to us differently than we think. We expect to confess our sins to Him and He puts Himself in the same spot with us, with sinners, and is baptized by John as a sinner. We expect that we have to approach God and instead, He gets there first and comes to us. We expect Him to come as a king and He comes as the son of poor parents, to be baptized in the dirty Jordan river. Jesus is light and life itself and He goes to the places where it's the darkest. He who is life itself takes death upon Himself. Sometimes we say things like: "Jesus, that doesn't work! It doesn't work at all!" to defend ourselves and, just like John, we would prefer to run away and not let Jesus get so close to us. He must not be mentioned in the same sentence as us and, above all, not with our sins. But Jesus encourages John, emboldens John. With His Words, Jesus gives John the space and strength to still say yes to what Jesus has in mind: "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus does this again and again. He also does it with us. He speaks with us, emboldens us, shows us that we are held safely in His hands, shows us that we can trust Him. His way of righteousness is the way that we can go. It is the only path we can take. And it continues. God says Yes to this! The path that Jesus takes to the Jordan and the path that puts Him on equal footing with sinners receives a great 'yes and amen' from heaven! God lets the heavens open and His Spirit descend and proclaims: "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

On this day, it is already clear what God has in mind for Jesus. Jesus shouldn't just stand by our side. He should also walk with us. His path doesn't just go into the dirty Jordan river. No, His path also goes to the bloody cross. His path doesn't only lead to John in the dirty Jordan, His path also leads to the multitude of your dirty sins. Just as Jesus stepped into the Jordan, He steps into the catastrophe that is all of your sins – your lies, dishonesty, egoism, your little faith. Jesus places Himself in the midst of it all and not just that, Jesus also steps into all your hopelessness. Where you are afraid of the future and afraid of danger, Jesus steps into your fear! Where you are sick and can taste death, He puts Himself in your sickness and death. Then God goes one step further and proclaims from heaven: This is good! And it's not just a good thing. Through your baptism, God opens heaven again and says something to you that doesn't fit into any human understanding. "You are my dear son with whom I am well pleased!" I stand there now with all my sins and weaknesses, I stand there with my search for a better life, and God opens heaven and clearly says: "I love you! I love you and you are my child!" What a great gift that is! God couldn't have given us a greater gift than that – Jesus with me in my baptism. That's why I will do as John did and not run away to hide under a garment of camel's hair, but I will go – go to where Jesus wants to visit me, where Jesus accepts me exactly as I am, even with my dark sides and even in my death. This Jesus will make me alive! And God wants it that way! Amen.