

MATTHEW

Chapter 3

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea ² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” ⁴ John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

3:1 IN THOSE DAYS – This often pointed to the end times and the Last Day (Mt. 7:22; 24:19, 22, 29, 36; 26:29). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

The most remarkable thing about the opening phrase “now in those days” is precisely its ordinary character. Though the readers/hearers know the narrative has now passed from the time of Jesus’ early childhood to the time when he is an adult, this passage of years has no significance in the narrative. Beginning with the conception and birth of this Jesus, a new time has begun: “those days.” Only the insignificant particle *δέ* (*ἐν δέ* ...) separates chapter 3 from chapter 2. The chapters are linked by their *theological* continuity, which finds expression in the common phrasing of “in the days of Herod the king” (2:1) and “in those days” (3:1). Like chapters 1 and 2, chapter 3 stresses the fulfillment of OT Scripture in those days (3:3). The time of fulfillment has come (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23), the Baptizer himself also was spoken of in Scripture (3:3), and the plan of God is now being unfolded. “Those days” (3:1), about which chapters 1 and 2 have been speaking, are continuing in chapter 3. Structurally, this is one more indication that the first major section of Matthew’s Gospel extends on beyond the end of chapter 2. (CC)

John the Baptist. The forerunner of Jesus, born c. 7 B.C. to Zechariah, a priest, and his wife Elizabeth (see Lk 1:5–80). (CSB)

Son of Zechariah, an elderly priest, and his wife, Elizabeth, Mary's relative (cf Lk 1:36; 57–66). (TLSB)

preaching. God called John to prepare the way for Jesus (v 3). (TLSB)

Desert of Judea. An area that stretched some 20 miles from the Jerusalem-Bethlehem plateau down to the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, perhaps the same region where John lived (cf. Lk 1:80). (CSB)

Note from Mark 1:4 – Prophets and their activity are frequently set in the wilderness (e.g., Elijah; 1 Kg. 19:4-8). (TLSB)

After the exodus, grumbling Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness, and the prophet Isaiah often spoke of a second exodus in which God would again lead his people through the desert to repentance and salvation. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

3:2 Repent. Make a radical change in one's life as a whole. (CSB)

This exhortation, which John addressed to all Israel, called for a radical transformation of the entire person, a fundamental turnabout. To repent meant to be converted from unbelief to faith. "With one bolt of lightning, he hurls together both <those selling and those buying works>. He says: 'Repent!' [Matthew 3:2]. Now one group imagines, 'Why, we have repented!' The other says, 'We need no repentance' " (SA III III 30-4.3.3.31). (TLSB)

metanoew –To turn. John urges his hearers to change their way of life as a result of a complete change of thought and attitude regard to sin and righteousness. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

As John's ministry of baptizing (3:4–6) and his ministry of denunciation (3:7–10) make clear, the Baptizer is calling upon Israel to turn and *be converted*, to become once again the flock of the divine Shepherd. The Israel of John's day is a flock of lost sheep (10:6; 15:24), and John is calling them away from God's final judgment to conversion and true faith in the God from whom they have wandered. As the textual note on 3:2 shows, every other Matthean use of this verb μετανοέω, as well as all Matthew's uses of the noun μετάνοια and one of his three uses of the closely related μεταμέλομαι, has this same strong meaning of "be converted." John is in the desert from which Israel first entered the promised land long ago, in the water through which they entered the land (Joshua 3–4), and he is calling them out of the land, to enter it again and become God's people. By their unbelief they had become like the apostate Israelites who were exiled. As Is 40:3 announced the new exodus redemption that God was performing, which received preliminary fulfillment by God bringing Israel from Babylon back to the land

after his people's unbelief and judgment, so John stands in the desert to perform the same function. (CC)

the kingdom of heaven. A phrase found only in Matthew, where it occurs 33 times. See Introduction: Recipients. Mark and Luke refer to "the kingdom of God," a term Matthew uses only four times (see note on Mk 11:30). The kingdom of heaven is the rule of God and is both a present reality and a future hope. The idea of God's kingdom is central to Jesus' teaching and is mentioned 50 times in Matthew alone. (CSB)

This expression, used 32 times in Mt, means the same as "kingdom of God." "Kingdom" might better be translated "reign" because it refers not to a geographical location but to God's act of ruling. (TLSB)

The very nature of heaven when we have Jesus. Jesus was in their midst and therefore the kingdom was among them. Matthew favors "kingdom of heaven" over "kingdom of God" because he wants to remain sensitive to the Jewish reluctance to use "God" or his name. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

Throughout this commentary, the translation of βασιλεία will consistently be "reign" rather than "kingdom." This is an attempt to capture the more dynamic, active sense of God's reigning, God's coming forth to rule and exert his royal power. The close proximity of the cognate verb βασιλεύω in 2:22 reminds us that the noun βασιλεία implies the *action*, the *activity* of kingly ruling. In this understanding, the genitive in the phrase ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν is subjective, that is, "heaven's (God's) act of ruling." (CC)

IS NEAR – The perfect indicative active form (ἤγγικεν) of the verb ἐγγίζω serves well to express the eschatological tension between the "already" and the "not yet." The verb normally means "approach, draw near," but not necessarily "arrive." Yet the perfect indicative active form expresses an ongoing resultant state, hence the translation "stands near." Is God's kingly ruling activity fully present? No. Has it begun to operate? Yes, and John's preaching is part of it. John's connection to the reign of heaven is in view (cf. 11:12). (CC)

God's rule was near in Christ. (TLSB)

3:3 All three Synoptic Gospels quote Isa 40:3 (Luke quotes two additional verses) and apply it to John the Baptist. (CSB)

SPOKEN OF THROUGHOUT THE PROPHET ISAIAH – John the Baptist was the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3. "A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God." (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

How could John the Baptizer appear in the desert and say such things? Matthew answers precisely this question, introducing 3:3 with the causal γάρ, "For this is the one

...” Why was it John, of all people, who proclaimed that the nation of Israel must return to its God because the end-time royal ruling activity of God stood near? He was the one spoken of in Is 40:3! In the original context of Is 40:3, the eighth-century prophet Isaiah describes a herald who will announce the good tidings of God’s mercy in restoring the exiles of Judah to the land. (CC)

A VOICE – The prophet Isaiah so described the Lord’s forerunner, John. (TLSB)

make straight paths for him. Equivalent to “Prepare the way for the Lord” (see note on Lk 3:4). (CSB)

Repentance is compared to building a straight road. (TLSB)

Both the (מִסְלָה לְאֱלֹהֵינוּ), “a highway for our God”) and the ἄς τριβους τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν, “the paths of our God”) end with “our God.” Matthew’s rendering, literally, “the ways of *him*,” and John the Baptizer’s role as forerunner of Christ make it all the more certain that John is preparing the way for the κύριος, that is, Jesus, who is “God is with us” (1:23). Here is an instance of the most common way that the NT writers proclaim the deity of Christ: they take an OT citation or reality and put Jesus into the place of Yahweh, the God of Israel. (CC)

3:4 JOHN’S CLOTHES – He was dressed for the location. His appearance and his stern sermon illustrated how little we need fancy clothes. The message carries it self. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

In emphasizing John’s appearance and dress, the evangelist is drawing a parallel between the Baptizer and Elijah of old. The similarity in wording between LXX Ki 1:8, where Elijah is recognized precisely from his austere appearance, and Mt 3:4 is probably sufficient to show that Matthew intends this connection. The later teaching of Jesus about John’s unique significance in the history of salvation (11:7–15) makes the case certain: “He is Elijah, who is to come” (11:14). (CC)

Moses & Joshua / Elijah & Elisha / John & Jesus

locusts and wild honey. A man living in the desert did not hesitate to eat insects, and locusts were among the clean foods (Lev 11:21–22). John’s simple food, clothing and life-style were a visual protest against self-indulgence. (CSB)

3:5 PEOPLE WENT OUT – This is the imperfect tense which means “they kept coming to out to him.”

John’s preaching caused enormous excitement. (TLSB)

3:6 CONFESSING THEIR SINS – This complexity shows that true repentance—the turning away from sin and unbelief and toward God in faith—comes by the Word of God, the end-time proclamation of the reigning activity that God is now beginning in Jesus. Thus John’s preaching produces repentance. That repentance continues to be

expressed by the people confessing their sins as they are baptized with John's baptism. Moreover, the gift that is John's baptism also produces ongoing repentance and faith in the One whom John is announcing. (CC)

Those who were baptized and confessed their sins could be certain of the forgiveness of sins (cf Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3). John Chrysostom: "When the sacrifice was not yet offered ... how was remission to take place?... Had they not condemned themselves, they could not have sought after His grace; and not seeking, they could not have obtained remission. Thus that baptism led the way for this; wherefore also he said, that 'they should believe on Him which should come after him' " (NPNF 1 10:62–63). (TLSB)

THEY WERE BAPTIZED – The goal of John's Baptism at the Jordan River was to produce repentance. (TLSB)

It should be noted that John's baptism is *not* the same thing as Christian Baptism, although there are obvious shared characteristics. (CC)

There were various water and purification rites in Judaism of the first century AD, although there is not enough information available to us to know precisely how they functioned. In some ways, perhaps, John's baptism was similar to the rites of other groups in his historical context. Yet the uniqueness of John's baptism is shown in its relation to his preaching. Just as John shockingly addressed his call to conversion to *Israel*, and not to Gentiles or to a subgroup within Judaism, so John's baptism is for all *Israel*, and not for a subgroup in Israel or for Gentiles only. Just as John announced the in-breaking of God's end times and his kingly ruling deeds, so John's baptism "was eschatological and probably sealed the repentant, marking them as those who would pass through the coming judgment to enter the messianic kingdom." (CC)

What did John's baptism do? In the first place, it is necessary to distinguish, as John himself does, between his baptism with water and the baptism that Jesus himself will administer on the Last Day, a baptism "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (3:11). John's baptism prepared the people for that end-time event, but it was not that event. Nor should we equate John's baptism with Christian Baptism, the institution of which comes at the very end of Matthew's Gospel, and which incorporates the baptized into the Triune name of God. Christian Baptism seals the believer for salvation at the final end-time baptism that Christ will pour out, and it anticipates that end-time event. Christian Baptism thus joins the baptized to the Last Day. (CC)

What, then, did John's baptism do? Here in Matthew, there is an interesting sort of reciprocal relationship between John's preaching of repentance (that is, turning from unbelief and to faith in the God whom John is proclaiming) and John's ministry of baptism. On the one hand, the people who came to his baptism seem to have already repented, because as they were being baptized they were confessing their sins (see the textual note on 3:6). On the other hand, John's later words, when taken in what is probably their most natural grammatical sense, indicate that his baptism results in repentance ("I myself am baptizing you with water for/unto repentance"; see the first

textual note on 3:11). Although Matthew does not give us any explicit information about the precise relationship between John's baptism and the forgiveness of sins, Matthew's narrative would surely accommodate the idea that God forgave the people's sins through John's baptism, since the people being baptized are confessing the sins from which they need to be saved, and from which Jesus will save them (1:21). We can conclude, then, that through John's baptism God granted forgiveness and further repentant faith. John's preaching had already moved the people to participate in this new, end-time reentry into the Promised Land and into membership in God's covenant people, and to look for the Mightier One and his end-time deeds. (CC)

The baptism of John was a baptism with water (John 1:33), of repentance for the remission of sin (Mark 1:4). It was administered in the name of the Triune God, who had commanded it (John 1:33), and was an effective means of grace (John 3:5). (Summary of Doctrine – Koehler)

During the public ministry of Christ His disciples likewise baptized (John 3:22; 4:2), which Baptism was essentially the same as John's. And it does not appear that those who were baptized by John or by the disciples of Jesus were later re-baptized, when Christ instituted His Baptism. However, after John had died, some of his disciples did not join themselves to Christ, to whom the Baptism of John pointed, but continued as a separate sect, and baptized "unto John's baptism" (Acts 19:3). The baptism of these later disciples of John was not commanded by God, did not point to Christ as the Savior from sin, and was, therefore, not valid. (Summary of Doctrine – Koehler)

From these verses it has been estimated that from 200,000 to 500,000 people were baptized by John. (Exegetical Notes – Bult)

Jordan River. See note on Mk 1:5. (CSB)

3:7 Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees (see notes on Mk 2:16; Lk 5:17) were a legalistic and separatistic group who strictly, but often hypocritically, kept the law of Moses and the unwritten "tradition of the elders" (15:2). The Sadducees (see notes on Mk 12:18; Lk 20:27; Ac 4:1) were more worldly and politically minded, and were theologically unorthodox—among other things denying the resurrection, angels and spirits (Ac 23:8). (CSB)

WHERE HE WAS BAPTIZING – The grammar alone (literally, "were coming for his baptism") does not indicate whether the religious leaders sought to receive John's baptism or merely to observe the phenomenon. The other Matthean uses of ἔρχομαι plus ἐπί plus the accusative (here: τὸ βάπτισμα) are not decisive (3:16; 10:13; 14:34; 21:19; 23:35). However, the context supports the view that the religious leaders are actually intending to be baptized by John. John sarcastically wonders who warned *them* to flee the coming wrath, a comment that makes best sense if they were coming to be baptized, not just observe. Moreover, John's demand that Israel's religious leaders bring forth the deeds that mark a *genuine* repentance implies that they were claiming an external repentance, and thus a desire for John's baptism, outwardly behaving the

same as the others, who were “confessing their sins” as “they were being baptized” (3:6). Thus, in this context “for his baptism” almost certainly means “in order to receive his baptism.” (CC)

BROOD OF VIPERS – The negative force of this epithet, “offspring of vipers,” is naturally appreciated by considering the reputation of vipers throughout the Scriptures. This identical phrase is repeated in Mt 12:34; 23:33; and Lk 3:7. Mt 23:33 is similar to Mt 3:7 in that Jesus applies the phrase to the scribes and Pharisees, then asks how they could “flee” (φεύγω, as in 3:7) the coming judgment. The only other NT verse with ἔχιδνα is Acts 28:3, which indicates that it refers to a venomous viper, normally deadly. It is absent from the LXX it is not, however, a veiled reference to Satan, who is named ὁ ὄφις as well as ὁ δράκων. Also, if a reference to Satan were intended, one might expect the singular form, “offspring of the viper.” (CC)

COMING WRATH – The coming wrath is eschatological but not limited to that. (Exegetical Notes – Buls)

3:8 PRODUCE FRUIT – The Pharisees and Sadducees wanted John to baptize them without having repented and confessed their sins. Their works should give evidence of sincere repentance (cf. Lk. 3:10-14). “Confession, too, cannot be false, uncertain, or fragmentary. A person who confesses that everything in him is nothing but sin includes all sins, excludes none, forgets none. Neither can the satisfaction be uncertain, because it is not our uncertain, sinful work. Rather, it is the suffering and blood of the innocent Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (SA III 37-38) (TLSB)

3:9 *We have Abraham as our father.* See Jn 8:39. Salvation does not come as a birthright (even for the Jews) but through faith in Christ (Ro 2:28–29; Gal 3:7, 9, 29). (CSB)

The key lies in his statement in 3:9, “And do not think that you will go on saying among yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as father,’ for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise children for Abraham.” John has called the people out to a new exodus and back through the waters of the Jordan—in short, to conversion and faith again in the God who is about to manifest his reign on the earth in his Son. The promises to Abraham will be fulfilled; God is able to do such as he pleases. Physical descent from Abraham, however, is no substitute for heartfelt brokenness and confession of sin. The only proper response to such a call is to acknowledge one’s need, one’s complete absence of merit, that all are completely poor in spirit (5:3). (CC)

Their spiritual confidence based on biological descent from Abraham was no substitute for repentance. (TLSB)

OF THESE STONES – (Jews sometimes referred to Gentiles as stones) Implicit in this statement is the idea that those not descended from Abraham, the Gentiles, God can raise up, despite their total lack of life. (Exegetical Notes – Buls)

CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM – This means “children of God, believers. The Jews predicated membership in the Kingdom on mere physical descent. (Exegetical Notes – Buls)

3:10 *The ax is already at the root of the trees.* Judgment is near. (CSB)

What of those who refuse to repent, who would try to stand before God the King with anything other than complete dependence on his grace? The axe is laid to the root of such trees! These are the trees that, lacking true repentance, do not bear good fruit; they are about to be cut down and thrown into the fire! (CC)

Not fruit, limbs or trunk which are dead, but at the very root. Total cutting off is imminent. The wrath of God abides on him who rejects Christ. (Exegetical Notes – Buls)

Jerusalem was destroyed 40 years later.

THROWN INTO THE FIRE – The last four words denote its total uselessness (Cf. John 3:19-20). The works of the impenitent man are evil and useless. He hates Jesus, the Light, and refuses to come to Him, lest his works be made evident. (Exegetical Notes – Buls)

3:11 *with water for repentance.* John’s baptism presupposed repentance, and he would not baptize the Pharisees and Sadducees because they failed to give any evidence of repentance (vv. 7–8). (CSB)

MORE POWERFUL – The word means “beyond” anything he could do.

SANDALS –Only the humblest slave removed sandals.

with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Demonstrated in a dramatic way at Pentecost (Ac 1:5, 8; 2:1–13; 11:16), though here “fire” may refer to judgment to come (see v. 12). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all God’s people was promised in Joel 2:28–29. (CSB)

Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit those who repent, but the unrepentant will experience the fire of eternal punishment. Jesus baptized His disciples with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:33) and continues to pour out the Spirit on believers through Word and Sacrament. (TLSB)

John, then, proclaims in 3:11 that Jesus will fully pour out salvation (“the Holy Spirit”) and judgment (“fire”) at the eschaton. Though Matthew’s Gospel gives us no direct information about Pentecost and the pouring out of the Spirit on the church, we can suggest a relationship between Pentecost and the Last Day. The pouring out of the Spirit on Pentecost was for salvation, for forgiveness and reconciliation with God; these gifts already given will avail for final salvation *on Judgment Day*. Moreover, we know that Paul reveals that the Holy Spirit, who is already given through post-Pentecost

Christian Baptism, is the down payment of our final eschatological inheritance (Eph 1:13; 4:30; 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5). Accordingly, though John's words in Mt 3:11 do not refer directly to Christian Baptism, there is an unbreakable link between Christ's final work of salvation at the eschaton and the present giving of the Spirit in Holy Baptism. It is likely, however, that from his vantage point, John the Baptizer was not able fully to see this connection. (CC)

3:12 *His winnowing fork.* For the process of winnowing see note on Ru 1:22. Here it is figurative for the day of judgment at Christ's second coming. The OT prophets and NT writers sometimes compress the first and second comings of Christ so that they seem to be one event. (CSB)

A beautiful metaphor, the threshing floor. With finality grain and chaff are thrown up for the wind to drive the chaff away, never to be joined again. A stern warning: "If you reject this Christian baptism in impenitence you must face Christ as Judge." (Cf. Jn. 3:36) (Exegetical Notes – Buls)

WHEAT INTO BARN – Just as the harvester saved the wheat, God will save His people. Barn here means pit or silo for storing grain. (TLSB)

CHAF... WILL BURN – This likely refers to cleanup at the end of threshing season. Chaff had no value and so was burned. This is the eternal fate of those who refuse to repent. (TLSB)

UNQUENCHABLE FIRE – God's judgment (cf. Is.30:27; Mal 3:2). (TLSB)

3:1–12 John was a preacher of repentance, as was Martin Luther, who often emphasized that we believers must not only sincerely confess our sins but also be certain of forgiveness. Thank God for such preachers. • Almighty God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Burn my chaff, but quench my sinful passions in the daily washing of Holy Baptism. Amen. (TLSB)

The Baptism of Jesus

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. ¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

The baptism of Jesus is placed in the larger context of the ministry of John the Baptist. From the birth of Jesus and the visit of the Wise Men, Matthew's gospel moves directly to the return of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus from Egypt to Nazareth. Matthew does not report our Lord's presentation in the temple or his encounter with the teachers in the temple when he was a boy of twelve. He leaves these details to other writers and

focuses immediately on the ministry of John the Baptist. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 3, Part 1)

John knew his assignment and carried it out with deep conviction. He forcefully called all people to repentance and baptized those who confessed their sins. Yet he never lost sight of the fact that his ministry was not an end in itself, but by its very nature preparatory: “After me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Mt 3:11). A reading of the other synoptic gospels for additional details will enrich the preacher’s understanding (Mk 1:9–11; Lk 3:21–22). While St. John does not record the baptism of Jesus, the first chapter of his gospel is filled with references that flow from that event. A careful reading of those verses is strongly recommended for contextual perspective. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 3, Part 1)

3:13 Much is packed into this short text. First, it is significant that Jesus traveled from Galilee in the north to the Jordan to be baptized there. The Jordan of course is associated with a long history and theology. It was the eastern boundary of the Promised Land, and the scene of many miracles (Joshua 3–4; 2 Kings 5; etc.). This involves the so-called scandal of particularity: God chooses certain places, persons, things, and times through which he works. The fact that they appear no better or no different than others—or appear even worse, from a human standpoint—causes many to take offense, as with Naaman in 2 Kings 5. The same certainly was true of Christ himself; the “foolishness” and “weakness” of his cross was an offense to Jew and Gentile alike, but to the eyes of faith he is seen as the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:18–25). The same can be said of the means of grace God uses today; they appear ordinary, even mundane, but the eyes of faith recognize them as God’s tools of salvation. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 3, Part 1)

THEN – Tote – When John the Baptist was at the height of his ministry. For Jesus the quiet life he had lead was about to come to an end.

JESUS CAME – παραγίνεται ὁ Ἰησοῦς—The historical present verb παραγίνεται is repeated from 3:1, and so it links Jesus’ appearance closely to John’s ministry. For the translation of the historical present tense as “*did* appear,” see the first textual note on 2:13. The Savior’s personal name, “Jesus,” has not appeared in the narrative since 2:1. Here it reappears and recalls the reason for this name: “He himself will save his people from their sins” (1:21). (CC)

Jesus traveled at least 15 miles, perhaps much farther, to receive John’s Baptism. The two were cousins (Lk. 1:36-45) and likely knew each other. (TLSB)

First, Matthew writes: “Jesus did appear from Galilee” (3:13). The use of the Christ’s personal name is noteworthy. The angel revealed the name “Jesus” and its meaning to Joseph (1:21), who so named him (1:25), and Matthew called him by name as he turned his narrative to the account of the Magi (2:1), but since then the personal name “Jesus” has been absent from the Gospel. In the rest of chapter 2, Jesus was called “the child”

(2:8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 20–21). Then in the preaching of the Baptizer in chapter 3, he was called the mightier “one who is coming” (3:11), the eschatological Judge. Now “*Jesus* did appear” (3:13), the one who is “God is with us” (1:23), who has come to “save his people from their sins” (1:21). (CC)

JORDAN – Near the Sea of Galilee and about twenty miles from Nazareth.

TO BE BAPTIZED – τοῦ βαπτισθῆναι—The articular infinitive expresses purpose, Christ’s reason why he appears at the Jordan: “to be baptized.” This also is precisely the reason why John objects and tries to hinder Jesus. (CC)

Jesus arrives at the very place where the people have been confessing that from which he has come to save them: “their sins” (1:21; 3:6). As they confessed their sins, the people were being baptized by John in response to John’s message: “Repent!” (3:2). Now Jesus has come to the same place, to the same person, and, as Matthew explicitly declares, for the same purpose: “in order to be baptized” by John, who tries to thwart Jesus’ purpose (3:13–14). (CC)

3:14 TRIED TO DETER HIM – ἐκώλυεν—This is a textbook instance of the conative force of the imperfect indicative. The context indicates that John “*tried* to prevent” what Jesus intended to do, but failed to do so. (CC)

John the Baptist at first tried to prevent him (that is the force of the conative imperfect *diekōluen* in v 14), Jesus underwent the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins—of which he had none! That apparently offended John the Baptist at first, in much the same way that Peter took offense when Jesus tried to wash his feet (Jn 13:6–10). (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 3, Part 1)

John refused to baptize the Pharisees and Sadducees because they failed to repent (v. 8). Because Jesus was without sin, John also wanted to refuse Baptism to this One who was mightier than he (cf. v. 11). (TLSB)

I NEED TO BE BAPTIZED BY YOU – ἐγὼ χρεῖαν ἔχω ... καὶ σὺ ἔρρη—The two pronouns, ἐγὼ and σὺ, are emphatic because they are unnecessary. They underscore John’s stunned response to Jesus. (CC)

In Jesus’ presence, John felt unclean (cf. Is. 6:1-5). He recognized that Jesus could do for him what no one else could. (TLSB)

The Baptizer’s incredulous words should not surprise careful readers/hearers of this Gospel in any age: “I myself have need to be baptized by you, and you yourself are coming to me?” (3:14). John well knew the dramatic contrast that also Matthew’s readers/hearers inevitably sense and that has characterized the church’s interaction with this text for centuries: the contrast between what John’s preaching has revealed about Jesus and the intention of Jesus to be baptized by John. We also do well to ponder the contrast! (CC)

John proclaimed that Jesus would baptize all Israel with the Holy Spirit and fire on the Last Day (3:11). But now Jesus has come—not as the One who baptizes with the Spirit and fire, but as the passive recipient of John’s own baptism. John’s baptism is “for repentance” (3:11), that is, for conversion from unbelief to faith, and for entrance into the people of God. The people who received John’s baptism had done so because they responded to John’s preaching to “Repent!” (3:2) with true penitence. So Jesus’ request to be baptized by John raises many questions: Does Jesus need to repent? Does Jesus need to be converted from unbelief to faith? Is Jesus among the lost sheep who were no longer members of the true Israel and who needed readmission into the people of God? John knows that the answer to these questions must be “No!” (CC)

Most striking of all is this contrast: John is the voice of OT prophecy and so therefore is completely reliable. He has proclaimed that Jesus comes in power, bringing end-time salvation and judgment—a Jesus so superior to and mightier than John himself that the Baptizer is not worthy to perform the most menial service for this Jesus (3:11). Yet now Jesus has come to John, not displaying his power or his incomparably higher status, but in lowliness, to be baptized by John. In light of John’s own preaching, his incredulous words to this lowly kind of Christ are reasonable in every sense of that term: “I myself have need to be baptized by you, and you yourself are coming to me?” (3:14). (CC)

This clearly shows that John recognized Jesus for who he was. He knew that Jesus did not need repentance. He also knew that the Kingdom of Heaven was near. He recognized this in Jesus. The need for Jesus’ baptism was incomprehensible to John as it is to us.

3:15 *Jesus answered.* First recorded words of Jesus in Mt. (TLSB)

This occasion marked the beginning of Christ’s Messianic ministry. There were several reasons for his baptism: 1. The first, mentioned here, was “to fulfill all righteousness.” The baptism indicated that he was consecrated to God and officially approved by him, as especially shown in the descent of the Holy Spirit (v. 16) and the words of the Father (v. 17; cf. Ps 2:7; Isa 42:1). All God’s righteous requirements for the Messiah were fully met in Jesus. 2. At Jesus’ baptism John publicly announced the arrival of the Messiah and the inception of his ministry (Jn 1:31–34). 3. By his baptism Jesus completely identified himself with man’s sin and failure (though he himself needed no repentance or cleansing from sin), becoming our substitute (2Co 5:21). 4. His baptism was an example to his followers. (CSB)

LET IT BE SO NOW – Jesus is assuming his office and so it is to be without delay. Jesus is agreeing with John, but though he is sinless, he is the sin-bearer, and therefore needs to do this so he can be our substitute.

In the present context of Jesus’ mission to save sinners (1:21). (TLSB)

Now we arrive at Christ's crucially significant words in reply to John, at the center of the chiasm formed by 3:13–16a. Jesus replied: "Allow [it] at this time, for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). (CC)

The interpretation of virtually every word in Jesus' response to John is important. The first word in Jesus' reply, ἄφες, "Allow [it]," indicates that Jesus' Baptism is a concession, an allowance due to his state of humiliation: the sinless Son of God receives the baptism meant for sinners because he shall be the sin-bearer. The adverb "at this time, now" (ἄρτι) validates John's earlier eschatological preaching about the reign of heaven and the Coming One. John had spoken of what the Coming One would do on the Last Day (3:11–12), and Jesus' submission to John's baptism is a public affirmation that John's preaching was true. Moreover, Jesus' Baptism "at this time, now" is necessary preparation for what Jesus will do on the Last Day. Yet the fact that Jesus needs to say, "Allow [it] at this time," to persuade John to baptize him now indicates that John does not yet understand how the Coming One will manifest the reign of heaven "now," in the present time, as the humble sin-bearer. (CC)

PROPER FOR US – The dative pronoun "for us" (ἡμῖν) prevents Matthew's readers/hearers from thinking too exclusively in terms of *Jesus*. The Christ did not say, "It is fitting for *me* to fulfill all righteousness." John also is participating in what it means "to fulfill all righteousness." The participle "fitting, proper, right" (πρέπον) invites a sort of comparison and so a question: "Fitting in relation to what? Why is this action, Jesus being baptized by John, *fitting*?" Then there is the adjective "*all* [πᾶσαν] righteous." In some sense, this deed of Jesus' Baptism has a comprehensive, all-embracing character and meaning. (CC)

TO FULFILL ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS – Jesus submitted to John's Baptism, the same that sinners were undergoing, in order to affirm His identity with sinners and to provide them with perfect righteousness (2Co 5:21). Hippolytus: "I am the Fulfiller of the law; I seek to leave nothing wanting to its whole fulfillment... Baptize Me, John, in order that no one may despise baptism" (*ANF* 5:236). Jesus' Baptism marked the beginning of His public ministry and anticipated His death on the cross (cf Mk 10:38; Rm 6:3). The fact that all four Gospels report the Baptism of Jesus points to its importance. Luther captured the primary meaning for His Baptism: "[Christ] accepted it from John for the reason that he was entering into our stead, indeed, our person, that is, becoming a sinner for us, taking upon himself the sins which he had not committed, and wiping them out and drowning them in his holy baptism" (*AE* 51:315). (TLSB)

πρέπον ἐστὶν ἡμῖν πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην—The infinitive πληρῶσαι is the proper grammatical subject of the verb ἐστὶν ("to fulfill is ..."). The present participle neuter singular nominative πρέπον (from πρέπω, "be fitting, proper, right") forms a periphrastic construction with the linking verb ἐστὶν, literally, "To fulfill all righteousness is fitting for us." The plural pronoun ἡμῖν, "for *us*," shows that both John and Jesus participate in carrying out God's historical actions of salvation. John, as the one who baptizes Jesus, acts together with him to "fulfill all righteousness," that is, to enact God's deeds of salvation. (CC)

A substitute has to go into the game to replace someone and get into the action and not mail it in, so Jesus needed to completely do all the things that is required of humans. A quote from Luther, “If that shall be performed that the poor sinners may come to righteousness and be saved, you must baptize me. Because for the sake of sinners I have become a sinner, must therefore do what God has charged sinners to do, in order that they may become just through me. (CC)

The key phrase is “to fulfill all righteousness” (πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην), an activity that is being carried out by both John and Jesus in the action of John baptizing Jesus. The likely meaning of “to fulfill” is clear enough in this Gospel that focuses so much attention on Jesus’ deeds (and events related to them) as the fulfillment of OT Scripture. Matthew often uses passive forms of the same verb for Scripture being “fulfilled.” Thus “to fulfill” virtually carries in itself the meaning “to enact or participate in the divine scriptural plan of salvation.” (CC)

What does it mean “to fulfill, to enact the scriptural plan, of *all righteousness*”? Presumably this would be the righteousness of which the OT speaks, since it is being “fulfilled.” But *whose* righteousness was spoken of in the OT? Again, the infinitive “to fulfill” can lead the way. On the one hand, the noun “righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη) at times in Matthew’s Gospel certainly does refer to righteous human conduct on the part of Jesus’ disciples, especially when it is specifically referred to as “your righteousness” (5:20; 6:1). John, however, has announced that “the reign of *heaven* stands near” (3:2), that *God’s* royal ruling deeds are beginning in history. *Jesus* is the one who will both repeat John’s message (“The reign of heaven stands near!” 4:17) and begin to make it come true by bringing that reign himself! *God* is beginning to act. *God’s* righteousness will be fulfilled when John baptizes Jesus, and then all people may in faith seek *God’s* reign and *his righteousness* in Jesus (6:33). (CC)

Now we come to the key point. In what sense does Jesus refer to *God’s* righteousness? Here the prominent OT way of speaking of God’s righteousness comes to our aid. In the OT, especially in the Psalms and Isaiah (e.g., 51:5–8), and in later Jewish literature as well, God’s “righteousness” (קִדְּוָה or הַקְּדוּשָׁה in the MT; δικαιοσύνη in the LXX) refers readily to the saving deeds that Yahweh performs on behalf of his people, and in that sense it often stands in parallel to “salvation.” A parade example is Psalm 71, where the expression “your righteousness” occurs repeatedly, referring to God’s righteous and saving acts: “My mouth will tell of your righteousness [הַקְּדוּשָׁה; LXX: τὴν δικαιοσύνην σου], of your salvation [הַשְׁלֵשָׁה; LXX: τὴν σωτηρίαν σου] all the day” (Ps 71:15 [LXX 70:15]; see also Ps 71:2, 16, 19, 24). The eschatological context of John’s preaching and ministry makes it all the more likely that this dominant OT sense of God’s “righteousness” as his “saving deeds” is present here in Jesus’ reply to the Baptizer. The end time brings the fulfillment of God’s promise to act in history on behalf of his people to save them. (CC)

To put the pieces together, then, Jesus' reply to John can be fleshed out as follows: Jesus has come to be baptized by John, to submit to the baptism that sinful Israel is undergoing. John objects, because he knows that Jesus is the One who will be Mighty Savior and Judge of all on the Last Day. But Jesus explains that in the present time ("now"), this shockingly unexpected action is comprehensively fitting ("*all* righteousness") as the way for John and Jesus together to perform the savings deeds of God, now that the reign of heaven has broken into history in Jesus. For Jesus to submit to John's baptism is fitting. (CC)

Why? Because it shows perfectly *how* this Jesus "will save his people from their sins" (1:21). It shows *how* the reign of heaven will come now, in an unexpected way. With John's participation, Jesus will perform "all righteousness," that is, he will enact God's saving deeds for the people by (literally) standing with sinners, taking the place of sinners, receiving from John the baptism that sinners receive. Ultimately, *all* of Jesus' ministry will come to its head as the Scriptures are fulfilled (26:54, 56) in the arrest that leads to his trial and condemnation and crucifixion. There the sinless one will offer up his own life as the ransom payment *in the place of the many*. That's why it is "fitting" for Jesus to come and stand in the Jordan and be baptized, to stand (literally) *in the place of the many*. Later Jesus will perform the judgment, the separation, the baptism with Holy Spirit and fire of which John spoke (3:11); but not "at this time" (3:15). Jesus' willing Baptism in the Jordan is a sign that points forward. It is a cruciform harbinger, pointing forward to the hidden and unexpected, shockingly weak and vulnerable in-breaking reign of God, to the paradoxical enthronement of the King of the Jews on the cross. (CC)

In this way Christ was "to fulfill all righteousness" (v 15). He was baptized as if he were a sinner in order to begin his public ministry as the sin-bearer, the one who takes away the sin of the world, "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21; cf. Is 53:11, "my righteous servant will justify many"). (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 3, Part 1)

The importance of Christ's baptism can scarcely be overestimated. Later in his ministry Christ described his passion as Baptism (Mk 10:38; Lk 12:50), implying that his Baptism committed him to fulfill the purpose for which he came—to suffer and die for the sins of all. It is significant that Jesus applies the term Baptism also to the martyrdom of his apostles (Mk 10:38–39). The implication is that our own Baptism into Christ's death (Rom 6:3) commits us to follow our Lord, even into death as a martyr, should that be necessary. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 3, Part 1)

3:16–17 All three persons of the Trinity are clearly seen here. (CSB)

What happened after the Baptism of Jesus was startling and completely unexpected. The entire Trinity was revealed when the Father's voice declared Jesus to be His beloved Son and the Spirit descended on Him. Melancthon: "In the NT the persons are most clearly revealed in the baptism of Christ, where the Father says, 'This is My

beloved Son,’ and the Son is seen standing publicly in the river, and the Holy Spirit sits in visible form upon the Son.” (Chem. LTh 1:51). (TLSB)

3:16 HEAVEN WAS OPENED – καὶ ἰδοὺ ἠνεώχθησαν [αὐτῷ] οἱ οὐρανοί—The translation above, “and, look, the heavens were opened *to him*,” reflects the dative pronoun αὐτῷ. The inclusion of “to him” in this verse has significant manuscript support. Its originality would also explain the rise of the other (shorter) reading: Metzger notes that “it is possible that copyists, not understanding the force of αὐτῷ, omitted the word as unnecessary.” Therefore, its inclusion is the preferred reading. (CC)

Actually rent asunder. Luther, “Heaven opens itself, which hitherto was closed, and now becomes at Christ’s baptism a door and a window, so that one can see into it; and henceforth there is no difference any more between God and us; for God the father himself is present and says, ‘This is my beloved Son.’”

First, Matthew declares, “Look, the heavens were opened to” Jesus, and “he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him” (3:16b–c). The opening of the heavens to Jesus signals an end-time event. Perhaps it recalls the prayer in Is 64:1–2 (MT 63:19c–64:1) for God to “rend the heavens and come down.” (CC)

HE SAW – καὶ εἶδεν [τὸ] πνεῦμα [τοῦ] θεοῦ καταβαῖνον ὡσεὶ περιστερὰν [καὶ] ἐρχόμενον ἐπαύ—In context, the emphasis of the two participles, καταβαῖνον and ἐρχόμενον (“descending ... coming upon”), does *not* seem to be on *perceiving* the fact that these actions occurred (indirect discourse: “He *saw that* the Spirit of God was descending ... and was coming upon him”). Rather, the emphasis is on physically seeing the Spirit’s descent: “He saw the Spirit of God descending ... and coming upon him.” Although in predicate position, these participles function adjectivally, describing the Spirit. (CC)

Matthew emphasizes that the Spirit’s descent was for Jesus’ benefit. (TLSB)

Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus not to overcome sin (for he was sinless), but to equip him (see note on Jdg 3:10) for his work as the divine-human Messiah. (CSB)

Chemnitz says: “The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, not as though he were without the Spirit, the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in Him; but because it was prophesied that the Messiah, when He became our Mediator, should be anointed, not with oil, but with the Holy Ghost (Ps. 45:8; Is. 61:1), in order that all might rest assured that He was the Prophet whom they should hear. We must also remember likewise that Jesus had the Spirit as the spirit of life, not only as God, but also as man; now He received the Spirit as the Spirit of His office and as the Spirit of power, without measure. Because Jesus was true man, with the weakness and frailty of human nature, albeit without sin, therefore He was, as a man, in need of the equipment and preparation by the Spirit for the duties of His great work.” (CC)

Jesus then saw the Spirit descending and coming upon himself “like a dove.” Interpreters have not been able to reach firm conclusions regarding the significance of “like a dove.” (CC)

More certain, however, are the OT connections behind the Spirit’s descent upon Jesus. By highlighting the Spirit’s descent and coming upon Jesus, Matthew is proclaiming that Jesus is the One promised in the Servant Songs of Isaiah, especially in Is 42:1–4 and Is 61:1–9. It is as if Matthew anticipates the question “Who is this one who comes to be baptized by John?” and the evangelist is not content with only one facet of the answer. Mt 3:16 proclaims Jesus’ identity as the Lord’s Servant who, having received the Spirit of God, will perform the work of bringing justification to the nations, gently ministering to the “smoldering wick” and bringing hope to the peoples who trust in his name (Is 42:1–4, quoted in Mt 12:18–21). Jesus, with the Spirit upon him, will preach the Good News to the poor and will comfort those who are mourning (Is 61:1–3; Mt 5:1–12; 11:2–6). Significantly, this humble, Spirit-endowed eschatological Messiah of Israel is the one in whose name the *Gentiles* will hope (Is 42:4, quoted Mt 12:21). Matthew, evangelist of messianic Good News to Israel, never goes long in his narrative without reminding his readers/hearers that the Gentiles too will find shelter and nurture in Israel’s Messiah. (CC)

3:17 An allusion to Ps 2:7 and Isa 42:1. (CSB)

AND A VOICE – The Father’s voice, so often heard in the OT, was heard anew. (TLSB)

καὶ ἰδοὺ φωνή—A linking verb is implied and must be supplied in translation: “And look, *there was a voice ...*” (CC)

THIS IS MY SON – The Father’s declaration is for all to hear, including us today. Even John was not fully aware of Jesus’ divine origin till now (Jn 1:31–34). (TLSB)

Nor is the evangelist finished, even after proclaiming this much of Jesus’ identity and purpose. With a second “look” (3:17), he declares that God the Father’s voice is heard. Matthew does not explain or even emphasize who hears the voice, though he wants his readers/hearers to know that the voice is intended especially for them. (CC)

What is the significance of the words “This one is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased?” (3:17). I have argued elsewhere that both the near and farther Matthean contexts direct us to a particular understanding of Jesus as God’s “Son.” The Father’s words from heaven do not identify Jesus as the Davidic king of Ps 2:7, as is so often proposed. Rather, Jesus, who is God’s Son by right from conception and birth (Mt 1:18–25) is also God’s Son because he is the summation of God’s entire people Israel, God’s “son.” Jesus, the Son, embodies the nation and has come in the place of its people, as the typology that underlies the use of Hos 11:1 in Mt 2:15 has already so strikingly established, and as the immediately following narrative in 4:1–11 will so compellingly describe. At the first exodus, God constituted the nation as his “son” (Ex 4:22). In Jer 31:20 (LXX 38:20; this is a chapter to which Matthew has already made explicit

reference in Mt 2:17–18), God, through the prophet, speaks of his love for Ephraim, “my *beloved* son.” (CC)

WITH HIM I AM WELL PLEASED – As the Father’s beloved Son, Jesus fulfilled all righteousness (v 15), something that Israel, God’s OT son, failed to do. (TLSB)

ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα—The aorist indicative form of the verb, εὐδόκησα, is unexpected here because it normally indicates simple completed past action (thus it would be rendered, “in whom I *was* well-pleased”). The explanations of this form in the grammars are attempts to explain an anomalous usage which, though very uncommon, is not unknown elsewhere in the NT (e.g., see εὐδόκησα again in Mt 17:5; cf. Rom 8:30). In context, it seems clear that the Father’s pleasure *continues* to rest upon Jesus, and thus the aorist must be translated as if it were a Greek perfect: “in whom I am in a resulting condition of being pleased,” or “in whom *I am* well-pleased.” (CC)

My favor rests on him. Reminds one of the blessing in Divine Service II, “The Lord bless you and keep. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favor and + give you peace.” Because the Father looked on the Jesus with favor and accepted his sacrifice, He now looks upon us with favor because of the faith that has been worked within us. (CC)

In this new, end-time exodus of salvation that God is now inaugurating as his reign is breaking into history, Jesus has come as God’s Son, the representative of the nation, to be in the people’s place. The One who has come to be baptized in the place of sinners does so as God’s sinless Son by right, to save God’s “son,” lost in sin. Jesus is *truly* the Son of God, both in his person and in his purpose. “*This one*” (3:17), and neither John nor the nation, is the one to watch as he perfectly carries out the Father’s will, as only a perfect Son can do. All may become members of God’s people, God’s “son,” through Baptism and faith in him. For the Father is well-pleased with his Son’s humble Baptism in the place of sinners. And the Father will also be well-pleased with his Son’s lowly suffering and death in the place of sinners. The Father will reveal his pleasure in his Son by raising him from the dead. (CC)

The words spoken by the Father highlight the significance of Christ’s Baptism: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (v 17). These words quote from two key Scripture passages. In Psalm 2:7, Yahweh, the Lord, says to the Messiah/Anointed One, “You are my Son.” This is one of the royal psalms, which focus on Jesus, the Son of David, as the King ruling on Mt. Zion. Christ’s Baptism anointed him to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Yet the Father also quotes from Is 42:1, the OT Lesson for today. Though the linguistic relationship between the Hebrew and Greek words is complex, “chosen one” is roughly equivalent to “whom I love,” and “in whom I delight” is reflected in “with him I am well pleased.” The OT Lesson is the first of the four great Suffering Servant Songs in Isaiah (the others are 49:1–7; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12; cf. also 61:1–3). Christ therefore was baptized into this role, expressed so vividly in the words of the fourth song: “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our

iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Is 53:5). (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 3, Part 1)

The contrast between God’s anointed King and the suffering of the Lord’s Servant is stark and dramatic, but it is only after adopting the role of a servant that the Christ would be glorified (Phil 2:6–11). The Epistle Lesson for today ties these two roles together by referring to Christ’s Baptism and anointing, his healing ministry (as the Servant), and his exaltation as Lord over all. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 3, Part 1)

3:13–17 Because Jesus is our substitute, we need not fear God’s wrath and punishment for our sins. We are washed clean by the blood of the Lamb (Rv 7:14), who prepared the waters of Baptism for us. • Lord Jesus, You stood next to sinners in the waters of the Jordan. Stand with me now, and wash away my sins. Amen. (TLSB)