Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we hear about Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist. Then a voice comes from heaven and the Spirit descends like a dove. This is the same baptism we have where we are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and are marked on our forehead with the cross of Jesus.

We have been hearing about John the Baptist during Advent and now we hear about him again after Christmas and the birth narratives and we will jump forward to the beginning of Jesus ministry which began when Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan river. People were not sure who John the Baptism was, as he lived in the wilderness, was fashioned and diet challenged which was mindful of a prophet, even though there had not been a prophet for 100 years. There are obvious questions as to his identity. Is this Elijah or the Messiah they are asking as they come out to the wilderness to be baptized by John in the Jordan river as they listen to John exorcise the devil while exhorting them to repent. His exhortation is not simply encouraging people to do something but rather is a loud enthusiastic, passionate urging to action, pointing at spiritual growth and moral integrity. John was a fearless confronter who would call people a brood of vipers and was uncompromising and had great integrity. Many religious communities, including first-century Qumran, conducted water rituals s a purification ritual my immersion in a special bath called a mikvah which would purify per the purity laws in the Hebrew Bible, such as touching corpse, skin diseases, contact with bodily fluids, childbirth, etc. An archaeologist estimated there were 700 mikvahs over a wide area from the Temple Mount to outlying area.These are small stone pools with steps where people could immerse themselves to be cleaned. As well, devout Jewish males immersed themselves before each Sabbath and Jewish wives immersed themselves after each menstrual period.These cleansing’s were continual unlike the Christian baptism which is done once which was would continue the practice of water rituals, and in Jesus’ baptism narrative, tied baptism to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and divine adoption. The Old Testament often depicts the presence of God with fire.

John’s coming was predicted by Isaiah, as Matthew 3:1,3 quoted: 1*In those days John the Baptist* *came preaching . . . For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight*” and Malachi in Malachi 3:1 “3*See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts*.” in the Old Testament. Malachi also referred to Elijah coming first after talking about this messenger and people were wondering if John might be Elijah but this is clarified in Matthew17:10-13 ***10****And the disciples asked him, “Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?”****11****He replied, “Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things,****12****but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.”****13****Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.*” So, the narrative today depicts John the Baptist as an end-time prophet, the one would come before Jesus who announced that the end times in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil and raises the righteous to life in a messianic kingdom. In this new world all things would live forever in love, peace, justice, mutual support, freedom, and dignity. John had called people to repent and to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins to be part of the coming new world. Repent is to turn away from their sinful ways and with ts values and behaviors and to turn towards the coming realm. Baptism gives them and us a physical assurance that our final destiny is no longer determined by our brokenness but would be with God. Baptism was an invisible mark initiating those who received it into a community anticipating the realm. This brings great hope to the hopeless who feel because of their actions they are doomed. That is why people would endure the hardship of traveling out to the wilderness to be baptized. However, John tells them he is not the one through whom their end time transformation will take place. Jesus, the one whom John announces and is the Messiah will baptize the people not just with water but also with the Holy Spirit and fire and will carry out the final judgment (separate the wheat and chaff and will be the catalyst for the realm and will leave the Holy Spirit to empower the people to continue to witness about God’s kingdom after Jesus ascends to heaven to be with his Father. In the book of John the Apostle Chapter 11:11 “I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is the least of the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” Even though no one had fulfilled the purpose of what God wanted of them in God’s coming kingdom everyone who is a believer will have a greater spiritual heritage than John. This is because we have seen and know Christ and his finished work on the cross.

Now the focus changes to the one John heralds, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Son of God as Jesus begins his ministry. The early church questioned as do some today if Jesus was without sin why would he be baptized? I think first of all John always led by example while at the same time he honored John and what John was doing. Secondly, Jesus was able to experience what we experience in our baptism. Also, this was a pivotal time for Jesus is publicly identified as the one who transforms the world moving from the Old Testament to the New Testament. This demonstrated God is now going to take steps from Jesus ministry to signal the new order an the coming of God’s kingdom leaving the old order behind. The past and the future. Therefore, this baptism takes place in public. (story of woman I baptized at work.) Here’s the thing. We are to follow what Jesus tells us which makes this a sacrament, uses common elements of water and fire and Jesus commands. “**19**Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Trinity that was here at the beginning, is here now and in eternity. Do you know someone who wants to be baptized. Bring them here. Whenever I hear about a baby being born I ask if they are being baptized. At the hospital where I was a chaplain there was a book where people were baptized, often as an emergency and signed by the person who baptized them, often a nurse or a member of the medical staff. When someone has a baby who is critical many people immediately think about baptizing them. I totally get that. They want to be baptized to become an co-inheritor of the kingdom of whom the voice that came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” I think of each person baptized od saying you are one of my children and I am well pleased. Amen.