

THE FATHER'S CONFESSION

Mark 1:4-11

The Baptism of Our Lord (Series B)

January 7, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel for The Baptism of Our Lord is from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 1, verses 4 through 11. It is on page 707 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus does something unexpected. He does something that, well, for most of us would seem like a good thing to do. But for Jesus, it kind of seems like it's beneath him. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Mark 1, beginning at verse 4, we read in Jesus' name.

⁴ John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Hans and Sofia. You died.

Now you probably have no idea what I'm talking about. And all these other people here who witnessed your baptisms are thinking, *Well that's not what I saw. I think I would have noticed something like that.*

It wasn't the kind of death we usually think of when we use that word. It wasn't a physical death. It was a spiritual death. But that isn't to say it wasn't a real or literal death. It most certainly was a real death. It was a death with and in Jesus Christ, which is by far the safest kind of death. This morning we are going to learn about that death.

The text begins with John the Baptist. We were introduced to John during Advent, and now we return to John for The Baptism of Our Lord. At first it's just John and a bunch of sinners. John was out in the wilderness, "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (1:4). And that's the key phrase to remember about John's baptizing ministry—"a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

So here's what we learn about baptism from John—it works repentance and the forgiveness of sins. And this was even before Jesus instituted his baptism, which, in addition to everything

John's baptism did, also grants the Holy Spirit who brings life to our spirits. In Christian baptism we have repentance, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. But that isn't to diminish John's baptism. Anything that grants the forgiveness of sins is a pretty big deal.

So people from all over the region of Judea were going out to the wilderness to hear John preach and, especially, to be baptized by him. Even people from the holy city of Jerusalem were going out.

Now this thing about the wilderness and the Jordan River is significant. It reminds us of an event 1400 years earlier, when the Israelites entered the Promised Land through the Jordan River (*Josh. 3*). After wandering in the wilderness for forty years, they came to the Jordan River. They were right on the verge of entering the land God had promised them. But there was this river in the way. So God parted the waters of the Jordan River, just as he had parted the Red Sea forty years earlier, and the Israelites walked through on dry ground. So the Exodus was marked by miraculous water crossings at the beginning and at the end. And this second water crossing miracle—the one at the Jordan River—was their entrance into the Promised Land.

So think about what this means for those Jews who went out into the wilderness to be baptized by John. They didn't go the Jewish side of the river. The Jordan River was the eastern border of Israel. They could have gotten to the river without leaving Israel, but they went out to the foreign bank of the river (*cf., John 1:28*). They went to the other side. They went out into the wilderness—the same wilderness their ancestors came from—and they approached the river from the foreign side, just like their ancestors did 1400 years earlier. Do you see what they're doing? They're reenacting the entrance into the Promised Land. But they don't cross the Jordan and just go back to their homes in Jerusalem. It's not an entrance into the land. It's something better. Instead of crossing the Jordan, they are baptized in the river, and they enter into something else. They enter into a new kingdom—the reign and rule of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is the kingdom they had been waiting for.

And so we see that the gift of the land 1400 years earlier was foreshadowing something greater. The land was never really the thing, and it still isn't. The thing God's people were waiting for was Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came to reign over all of heaven and earth. This reenactment of the entrance into the Promised Land was John's prophetic symbol that the eternal kingdom, which God himself would establish, was drawing near (*Matt. 3:2*), and was in fact already here (*John 1:26*). The Kingdom of God had come in the person of Jesus Christ. That's why all these people are going out to the wilderness to be baptized.

And notice what else they're doing—they're confessing their sins. John is signaling the arrival of the promised reign of God on this earth, and these people respond appropriately by confessing their sins. This is the natural thing to do when confronted by the presence of God—to say, "We poor sinners confess to you that we are by nature sinful and unclean and have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed."

I suspect that for many of us, those words have become rote. That's what happens when you speak them every Sunday for, well, maybe your entire life. They become rote. But I hope you realize that's not a bad thing. It's actually a good thing.

Now when I say it's good for these words to become rote, I simply mean it is good they are memorized. I don't mean it's good for us to not think about them. I hope you don't just say

them without any thought to their meaning. The opposite should be true. When something is so familiar that it's etched on the wrinkles of your brain, it gives you the opportunity to think more deeply about what it means.

And when you come to a point in your life when you are confronted with your sin, those words will be available to you. Maybe it's when another person discovers you, and you are ashamed. Or maybe no one else knows, but you know, and for some reason you come to the stark realization that God knows too, and you feel ruined before him. We all have those horrifying moments when our guilt suddenly becomes very real to us. Now our guilt is always the same, whether we realize it or not. But in those moments when our consciences scream at us, then we will be glad these words are rote. When we realize we are lost and ruined, there is nothing to do but confess.

So this is what those Jews did when John proclaimed to them that the Kingdom of God was near and was in fact already here. They confessed their sins and received forgiveness for their sins through this baptism.

So we learn from this that baptism is for sinners. And this actually creates a little bit of a dilemma for us, because Jesus was baptized. But baptism is for sinners. And this is a general and universal rule: that baptism is for sinners. The whole point of being baptized is that it works repentance and the forgiveness of sins. That's why these people went out to the Jordan River. That's why we bring our children to God in baptism—so that the Holy Spirit might work repentance and forgive their sins. If we had no sin, we would need no repentance, no forgiveness, and no baptism. Baptism is for sinners, and sinners only. So we could call this scene in the wilderness by the Jordan River, "Wild John's Filthy Sinners Baptism Club." Almost everyone is welcome in this club. There's really only one person who's not eligible for membership. And that's Jesus. Why? Because he's not a sinner. It's "Wild John's Filthy Sinners Baptism Club," and there's just one requirement for membership: you have to be a sinner.

But here comes Jesus. And John tries to prevent him. Mark doesn't record this detail, because his account of Jesus' baptism is fairly short, but Matthew spends more time on it and makes a point of this—that John tried to prevent Jesus from being baptized (Matt. 3:14). That's because John knew what he was doing. He knew that baptism works the forgiveness of sins, and he knew who Jesus was. He knew that Jesus was far greater than he was (1:7). And, beyond that, he knew that Jesus is the sinless Son of God who needed no forgiveness and no repentance.

Those filthy sinners who came to be baptized by John were confessing their sins (1:5). So I wonder what John thought Jesus was going to confess. It turns out, someone else made a different kind of confession at that baptism. We'll get to that in a moment.

Jesus insisted on being baptized, and so he was. It seems odd, being that he had no sins to confess. But Jesus went there for the opposite reason. He went there, not to be forgiven, but to identify himself with sinners. Jesus actually did this quite often—from his conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary, where he took on the dying flesh of a baby human; to his baptism; to all the meals he ate with tax collectors, prostitutes, and various other kinds of sinners; and finally to his death between two condemned criminals and his Sabbath rest in a tomb. Every

step along the way, from the beginning of his human existence, to what seemed like the end, Jesus Christ, the Son of God in human flesh, identified himself with sinners.

The muddy waters of the Jordan River were a place for sinners. So we should not be surprised at all to find Jesus standing there. After all, he came to stand in the place of sinners. More than that, he came to hang in the place of sinners.

We find Jesus in all the places reserved for sinners. We find him being baptized. We find him in the company of sinners. We find him on trial. Typically people end up on trial when they do something bad. Jesus is even convicted and sentenced to death. Death row is a place reserved, really, for the worst sinners. So, naturally, Jesus goes there. And he hangs on a cross between two legitimate criminals. We even find Jesus in a tomb—the place finally reserved for all sinners. He goes to all the places appointed for sinners, and he goes there in our place. He goes to these places with and for sinners so that he can take these sinners to the next place he is going—the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting in his New Creation.

So think of baptism as this place where we drop something off for Jesus, and we pick up what he has left for us there. We drop off our sins, and Jesus takes them into himself. Now I don't know if Jesus absorbed all of our sins into his body on the day he was baptized. Scripture doesn't tell us that. But we do know that by the time he was strung up on a cross, he had taken every last sin of the human race into his own body (1 Peter 2:24). That much we do know. And, at the very least, his baptism indicates this identification with sinners.

And we also know from our epistle lesson in Romans 6 that baptism amounts to death with Jesus Christ.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Rom. 6:3-5)

In our baptisms, we are, most certainly, united with Jesus Christ in his death. But it's not only his death; it's also his life. It's his resurrection. It's a new life, granted by the Holy Spirit now, and also the promise of a complete and perfect resurrection on the Last Day. The promise of Scripture is clear: "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

This is how baptism saves. It's not a hocus pocus magic formula. It's not forgiveness by divine fiat. It's a connection to the death and resurrection of Christ. All this water does is connect you to Christ, and Christ did all the work in his death and resurrection. And that is why this water is a priceless divine treasure—because it connects you to your Savior. He has identified himself with sinners, and so we find him in this place for sinners.

And then pay attention to what God the Father has to say about all this. What happens when Jesus is baptized? The heavens are torn open and God the Father tells us what he thinks about all this. This identification with sinners—that might give us pause and create some knots in our brains—it overwhelms God the Father with joy so that he rends the heavens, the Holy

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Spirit comes down on Jesus like a dove, and God the Father confesses, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (1:11).

Imagine this. Have you ever been to a youth basketball game where some kid makes his first basket and then some guy yells out from the stands, "That's my boy!"? This is that moment for Jesus. He identifies himself with sinners, and God the Father is just plain proud of his Son. And it's because Jesus does something that seems to be beneath him. In fact, pretty much everything Jesus does in this whole Savior-of-the-World thing seems to be beneath him. But that's the work of salvation. That's what it takes to redeem sinners from their curse. That's what Jesus did so that when God the Father looks down on you now who have been baptized into Christ Jesus, he says the same thing about you: *This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.*

You who are baptized into Christ, understand this: since you are connected to Christ, what God the Father says about Christ, he says about you. Your sins have been taken up by Christ. They have been crucified with him. And the Father is well pleased. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.