

GOD'S BELOVED SON

Mark 1:4-11

The Baptism of Our Lord (Series B)

January 7, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 1, verses 4 through 11. 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.

The Baptism of Jesus is one of my favorite stories from the gospels. Maybe that's not such an exclusive thing, because my list is kind of long, and it keeps getting longer. I add passages to my list of favorites, but I never take anything off it. That's the nature of that kind of list. You notice something new in a passage, something that you've never noticed before, and it captures your heart. I suppose if we gave the Bible the proper attention that it deserves, every part would pop out as a favorite. But, as it is, this is one of my favorites.

The Gospel writers also seem to favor it, because it shows up in all four gospels. Not a lot of things appear in all four gospels, so when something does, we know it's important. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record it as a live event, while the apostle John records what John the Baptizer said about it in retrospect.

I like this passage because it has so much in it. And there's a little bit of a conundrum that forces us to think and wrestle with some things. That can be difficult for the moment, but it always pays off.

Concerning doctrine, it teaches three things. It teaches us about Baptism, it teaches the doctrine of the Trinity, and it reveals who Jesus is. So this sermon will be rather doctrinal, and I hope you think that's a good thing, because doctrine is simply the teaching about who God is and what he does. And I will try to demonstrate why the doctrine matters to us.

We'll take them in the order the text gives them to us. First, we learn about Baptism. This comes from what John the Baptizer was teaching. "John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness

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and proclaiming a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (1:4). So what do we learn here? We learn that Baptism works repentance and forgiveness.

This is a debated topic in the Christian Church, especially in modern times. A number of Christians, especially in America, reject the idea that Baptism saves or that it forgives sins. They think of it merely as an outward symbol of our commitment to Christ. You might know this already, and we've talked about this before. But it's important to be well-versed in this so that we can know why we believe what we believe, and so that we can persuade others of the truth. The point is not to defeat them, but to persuade them. If we're on the right side of it, we should want others to be with us.

When we say that Baptism forgives sins, we have a pile of Bible verses on our side. And this is one of them. John proclaimed a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Now there was a little bit of a difference between John's Baptism and the Baptism Jesus instituted, but not much. We really should not see them as two different kinds of Baptism. They are the same Baptism, but Jesus added the Holy Spirit to it when he died and rose again. And whatever differences there may be between John's Baptism and the one Jesus instituted, we would certainly not say that Jesus' Baptism is less powerful than John's. John's Baptism granted the forgiveness of sins. It says it in black and white, right in the text. If John's Baptism had that power, would we then think that Jesus' Baptism does not have that power? Of course not. John preached that someone mightier than him was coming. That was Jesus. So the Baptism Jesus institutes is at least as powerful as John's Baptism. Of course it forgives sins.

The difference between John's Baptism and the one Jesus instituted is the Holy Spirit. John says, "I have baptized with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (1:8). Some have wrongly interpreted this verse as if John is speaking of two different Baptisms. Many of our charismatic or Pentecostal friends think this way. They say John instituted water Baptism, and Jesus instituted the Baptism of the Holy Spirit as a second and separate Baptism. But that's not what we actually see with Jesus. We see in the Gospel of John, even while John the Baptizer is still alive, that Jesus starts baptizing as well, and he used water (John 3:22-24; 4:1). And the apostles continued to use water when they baptized. We see this most clearly at Pentecost in Acts 2, where Peter says, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Peter speaks of repentance and forgiveness of sins, much like John did. But he adds to that Baptism the gift of the Holy Spirit. That is what John the Baptizer promised would come, and after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Holy Spirit does come to us in Baptism.

So in this passage, John is not talking about Jesus replacing water with the Holy Spirit or adding a second Baptism. Rather, he means that Jesus will add the gift of the Holy Spirit to Baptism. So here's what we learn about Baptism: it forgives sins, and it gives the gift of the Holy Spirit.

When we talk with some of our Christian friends who don't agree with us on Baptism, verses like this might not convince them, not because they don't believe the Bible—they probably do—but because it doesn't fit into the rest of their doctrine. It sounds to many of them like we're saying that Baptism saves apart from Christ or apart from faith. But that is not true at all. Baptism does these marvelous things because it joins us to Jesus Christ. When Jesus came to John to be baptized, he identified himself with us. He came as one of us, and in our Baptisms, we are joined to him. This is what we heard in the epistle lesson from Romans 6,

"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,

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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).

Baptism does not save us or forgive our sins or give us the Holy Spirit apart from Jesus. We should not think of it as magic. We should not think of it as a ritual we perform in order to earn something from God. It does these marvelous things by joining us to Christ. We are buried with him and raised with him. So it does not save apart from Christ or apart from faith, but it saves by joining us to Christ. And being joined to Christ, we are then dependent on him and trust in him.

The second piece of doctrine we learn in this text is the Trinity. Or, at least, we learn part of it. It's rare to learn every part of an article of doctrine in one passage. We learn parts from one passage, and other parts from another passage.

The word Trinity is not in the Bible. Occasionally you'll run into someone who argues against the Trinity by saying the word isn't in the Bible. And that's okay. The word “Trinity” is just something we use to describe what we do see in the Bible. It means “three in one.” Think of the word “Trinity” as “triple unity” or “tri-unity.”

God is one, and there are three persons who are God. We see this all over the Bible. There are many passages that teach us that there is one God (e.g., Deut. 6:4). Then we ask, “Okay, who is this God?” And throughout the Bible, there are three distinct persons who are identified as God. There is no way you can come up with two. There is no way you can come up with four. If you read through the entire Bible and make a list of all the persons who are identified as God, you will get exactly three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And when they interact with one another, we see that they have unity but are still distinct persons. And when Jesus speaks of the Father or the Holy Spirit, he teaches us that they are one, and, yet, maintains a distinction.

Some people have come up with what they think is a clever way of solving this paradox. They have said that God is not really three persons, but he just takes three different forms, like how water can be a rock, a liquid, or a gas, but not all at the same time. Or it's like Superman. Sometimes he's Superman, sometimes he's Clark Kent, but you never see them both at the same time. He just takes a different form. This heresy has been around for nearly two thousand years. We call it modalism, because the idea is that God uses different modes. It was refuted a long, long time ago, but it keeps popping up, and everyone who thinks of it thinks they had an original idea. And I understand the temptation. The Trinity is mysterious. We don't really understand how God can be three and one at the same time. Nor has he told us how. He has only revealed that he is. But we want to solve the riddle.

Modalism is pretty easily refuted by this passage. Because in this passage we see the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We see each of them at the same time, and we see them interacting with each other. It would be like if we saw Superman and Clark Kent at the same time. That would be really surprising, first, because Superman's not real, but, second, he's supposed to be the same person as Clark Kent.

In this passage we see Jesus, as a man, standing in the Jordan River. And we see the Holy Spirit descending upon him like a dove. And we see the Father speaking from heaven at the same time. Three distinct persons.

This might seem trivial, but if we love God, we should care about who he is and how people speak of him. It would be like if you're in third grade, and some kid is acting like a third grader

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and trying to tell you that your mom and dad are actually the same person. That would probably bother you. And it should. We should be even more bothered when people speak wrongly about God.

When we recognize the doctrine of the Trinity, we see the different works that God does for us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Similar to how a mother and father do different things for their children, so the different persons of the Trinity do different things for us. The Father is our Creator. The Son is our Redeemer. And the Holy Spirit is our Sanctifier. That is, he's the one who sets us apart to belong to God. He creates and strengthens faith.

There's a neat little detail in this passage about the Holy Spirit. Mark is the shortest of the four gospels, so he doesn't have an opportunity to explain some things that the other gospels do, so he sometimes teaches those things with brief little details. He's very efficient with his words. So, while Matthew and Luke simply say that the heavens were opened when the Spirit descended, Mark says that the heavens were "*torn* open." This is how he describes the power of the Holy Spirit. And it should make us remember Isaiah 64:1, when the prophet prays, "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down." Mark is teaching us that the Holy Spirit is powerful, and when he comes to us also in Baptism, he comes with that same power. We may not see it or feel it. But he is present to guard us from forces we cannot see or feel.

The third piece of doctrine we learn might be the most important. We learn who Jesus is. He is the Son of God. This might not seem fresh to you. I hope you already know this. But imagine being there, at the Jordan River. Jesus goes up to John to be baptized, just like thousands of others had done. But a voice speaks from heaven saying, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (1:11). That would be a real epiphany. Even if you already know who Jesus is, to witness that would be something you remember forever.

The interesting thing, at least to me, is the timing of it. Jesus already was the Son of God, it's not like God adopted him at his Baptism. Why would he speak from heaven at this moment? Why not any other moment in Jesus' life? There were many more glorious moments of Jesus' life, moments that would make any father proud.

At Jesus' Baptism, he identifies with sinners. The conundrum in this passage is why Jesus was baptized at all. We learned from John's preaching that Baptism forgives sins. And everyone else was confessing their sins when they were baptized (1:5). But Jesus did not have any sins to confess. He did not need any forgiveness. We learn from Matthew that John tried to turn Jesus away when he came to be baptized (Matt. 3:14). So it's a conundrum for us. Why would a sinless Savior be baptized? It actually makes it look like Jesus is a sinner. And that's really the point. He is without sin, but he came to take our sins upon himself. So we might be surprised or confused to see Jesus in a place for sinners, but that is exactly why he came.

When we remember the cross and the grave, then it should make perfect sense to us that Jesus was baptized. Baptism is for sinners. But the cross and the grave are especially for sinners. The cross was an instrument of execution. It was for the worst sinners. And the whole point of Jesus coming to earth was to go to the cross. And he went to the grave as a dead man. The grave is the place appointed for all sinners. We die because of sin. It has been this way since the fall into sin (Gen. 3). The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23a). Jesus went to the cross and the grave, not to pay for his own sin, but to pay for ours. "He bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24). He carried them into death, to remove them from us forever.

Jesus' Baptism is a foreshadowing of this. He shows that he identifies with sinners. He identifies so closely with us that he actually takes our sin upon himself, and that is why the

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Father is pleased. The very moment Jesus identifies with sinners in Baptism, God speaks from heaven. Let there be no confusion. This Jesus is not a sinner, he is God's beloved Son, and the Father is pleased that his Son identifies with sinners.

So we go to Baptism because we are sinners. We need forgiveness, and we receive it in Baptism. We are joined, by water and the Word, to the Savior who identified with us, took our sin upon himself, died, and rose again. We are joined to him so that, just as he died for us, we will also rise with him to eternal life. This is how Baptism forgives sins. This is how it saves. We are joined to God's beloved Son. Amen.

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