

Jesus' Baptism: For Us and For Our Salvation (Mark 1:9-11)
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(Sermon Notes/Transcript)

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I was at a Pastor's Conference in Louisiana a couple weeks ago, and because of the size of the event, it had to be held at a large Baptist church building. At one point in the conference, one of the speakers, Anglican Bishop N. T. Wright, was answering a question about baptism. He was speaking to the question of infant baptism and the efficacy of baptism, and he stopped himself mid-sentence and said, "I can't believe I'm saying these things in a Baptist church."

Well, this morning, I find myself in the same situation. Berney Points is very gracious to share their facility with us, but I'm quite sure I'll say some things in this sermon that have never been heard before in this building.

Now, why are we dealing with the baptism of Jesus today? We've just entered into Epiphany in the church calendar. Advent begins the Christian year, as a time of preparation, focused on the coming of Christ. Then we celebrate the birth of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God during the twelve days of Christmas. And then we move into Epiphany. The word "Epiphany" means "revelation" or "manifestation." We celebrate those events that began to publicly reveal the identity of Jesus, those events that cluster around his early life and the beginning of his ministry

In particular, the focus is on a few key events in the gospels:

The visit of the magi from the east, along with the gifts they bring to the Christ-child, fulfilling OT prophecies of Gentile kings worshipping the Lord.

The baptism of Jesus, which begins his public ministry.

His first sign miracle, when he turns water into wine at the wedding in Cana.

Epiphany reaches its conclusion with the transfiguration, when the glory of Jesus is revealed to the inner circle of his disciples, just before he begins moving towards Jerusalem and the cross.

This morning, the slice of Epiphany we are celebrating is the baptism of Jesus. Now, why is the baptism of Jesus significant? Why would Jesus submit to John's baptism, especially since it was a baptism of repentance?

This is what we have to know in order to make sense of this event: *In his baptism, Jesus is identifying with us, with his sinful people.* Just as in our baptisms we identify with him, so he shows his solidarity with us by submitting to John's baptism.

In a sense you could say, as some theologians have, that there's just one baptism, namely, Christ's baptism. It's a once and for all event. And now when we are baptized we are simply made participants in his baptism.

The name "Christ" means baptized one, or anointed one.

We are Christians if we've been baptized. We've been anointed, or christened, into Christ. Our baptisms only have meaning insofar as they connect us to Jesus and make us sharers in his baptism (his anointing). As John Calvin said "Jesus sanctified baptism in his own body that he might have it in

common with us as the firmest bond of the union and fellowship he forms with us...The fulfillment of baptism is in Christ. For all the gifts God offers in baptism are found in Christ alone.”

Thus: What happened at Jesus’ baptism is a model for understanding your own baptism. It’s a paradigm. It shows us what baptism is all about.

So: what happened at Jesus’ baptism? How does it help us to live as God’s baptized people?

Three things happened according to Mark’s account: the heavens parted, the Spirit descended, and the Father spoke. Let’s talk about each of those.

First, the heavens opened. Actually, Mark uses a very unique word. He says literally the heavens were ripped open. The sky was torn through.

Mark uses this word once more time in his gospel -- at the death of Jesus, in Mark 15:38. As soon as Jesus breathes out his last, the veil of the temple was ripped from top to bottom. The same Greek word is used.

Mark wants you to see a connection.

The veil in the temple was symbolic of the veil between heaven and earth.

These veils meant that sinful creatures were excluded from God’s presence.

But Jesus came to tear through the veil, to open up heaven to the sons of men.

What he begins at his baptism, he completes at his cross. The baptism of water begins to open the pathway back into God’s presence; the baptism of blood at his death finishes the job.

What does God offer to you in baptism? He offers you access into his presence. He offers you free passageway to heaven. He offers and gives you standing in his royal priesthood. Baptism is like a “backstage pass” – having had our bodies washed with water, we draw near through the curtain, into the Most Holy Place (Heb. 10:19ff).

Baptism opens the door to the heavenly sanctuary for believers. You pass through water back into the presence of God. Baptism is a passageway -- this is why biblical writers compare baptism to crossing the Red Sea out of Egypt, or crossing over the Jordan into the promised land.

Baptism effects a transition, a movement.

But God not only opens the door of heaven so we can enter into his sanctuary; he also opens heaven so that his Spirit can descend.

And that’s the second thing we see in the baptism of Jesus. He receives the gift of the Spirit.

Here we can say the baptism of Jesus answers Isaiah’s prayer in Isaiah 64:1. Isaiah prayed, “Lord rend the heavens and come down.”

Well, here the Lord does tear open the heaven and he comes down in the person of his Spirit and the form of a dove. The Spirit is poured out, in, with, and through the pouring of the water.

Now put these things together -- you have the Spirit, you have water, you have a voice (which we'll talk about in a minute). That combination of Spirit, water, and divine voice takes us right back to Genesis 1, where the Spirit fluttered over the waters on the face of the earth and the Father spoke "Let there be"

Baptism is nothing less than a new creation. Or, to be more specific, in being baptized, Jesus becomes the first fruits of a new creation. He is like another Noah -- when the flood waters began to recede, the sign was a dove, fluttering above the earth. When Noah stepped off the ark, he was a new Adam, entering a new creation. Well, Jesus is that new creation, that new world, in a microcosm. His new ark, the church, is the place of salvation.

In Jesus' baptism, a new world begins to be born. A new world order, a new kingdom begins to dawn. God breaks into history to do something new. The way this Gospel unfolds confirms this. Look at what happens next -- Jesus is driven into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan, just like the first Adam was tested by Satan in the Garden. The environment is now a fallen one rather than a perfect one, but even so, Jesus remains obedient. He's a new Adam -- but he's a faithful Adam, rejecting Satan's word. He stays true to his identity as the Son of God, declared at his baptism.

After his baptism and testing, he begins to preach that the kingdom of God has arrived. What is this kingdom, that comes from another world into this one?

The kingdom of God is just the renewal of the creation. It's the restoration of the world; it's God setting things right, and putting things back on course.

Now what about *our* baptisms? What happens to *us* when we are baptized into Christ?

In Titus 3:5 Paul says we've been saved not by our own works but by God's mercy through the washing of regeneration. Paul actually says the washing of *re-gensis* in the Greek; that is, a washing through which God puts you into the new creation, the new world. It's your exodus, your Red Sea crossing out of the Egypt of sin and death, and deliverance into a new and mature form of life, seated with Christ in the heavenlies.

In baptism God offers us his Spirit and therefore, offers us a new life, a new family, a new name, and a new world. Heaven opens so that the Spirit can descend, and so that we, in union with Christ and by the power of the Spirit, can ascend.

Finally, there is the voice from heaven.

The Father speaks and says, "You are my Beloved Son, in who I am well pleased!"

Now, what's interesting is that the divine voice is using language from OT Scriptures in order to identify Jesus. God uses his own word -- words taken from the Hebrew Bible -- in speaking to his Son.

In fact, what happens here is the Father strings together three snippets, from three different OT passages. When you see how this works its really amazing.

“You are my Son” -- that declaration is taken straight from Psalm 2:7. Psalm 2 is an enthronement Psalm, a coronation Psalm. It identifies Jesus as the promised son of David, as the King of Israel.

In fact, we could say at his baptism, Jesus receives a crown of water. He is installed into office as the King of Israel. Baptism is a coronation.

But Psalm 2 goes on to say that the Greater Davidic king will rule the nations, that the other kings of the earth must kiss the Son, lest he become angry. He's not just Israel's king, he's the world's king. He's patterned after David but does what David could not.

What's the second snippet? You know that old game of “name that tune”? You'd hear just a tiny fragment of a song and try to identify it.

Well, here we have a game of name that tune – or really, name that text. It's a very brief echo of an OT passage, but there's no doubt it's there. (In the Bible every word paints a thousand pictures!) Jesus is called the “Beloved Son” -- language alludes back to Gen. 22:2 where God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his beloved son.

See, Jesus is not just the new Davidic king, he is also the new Isaac, the promised son, born of the Spirit's power. And like Isaac, he becomes a sacrificial offering, only unlike Isaac, this time the Father doesn't pull the knife back at the last moment.

God the Father and God the Son are going to re-enact the whole story of Genesis 22, where Abraham takes his beloved son Isaac up on the mountain to sacrifice him. But God the Father and God the Son will have to follow through on it, whereas Abraham and Isaac did not. No ram is provided at the last moment as a substitute for this Son. Instead the Son becomes the substitutionary ram himself.

But just as Hebrews 11 tells us that Abraham received Isaac as one back from the dead, figuratively speaking, so God the Father and God the Son will be reunited by the resurrection. The Father and the beloved Son will be reality for which Abraham and Isaac were merely type and shadow. All that is bound up in those two little words “Beloved son!”

He's the Davidic King, but he's also the new Isaac, the sacrificial seed. This is one of the paradoxes of the gospel: the king is revealed on the cross. The one who possesses absolute rule becomes absolute servant. Jesus is both David and Isaac, both king and sacrificial victim, both royal son and sacrificial son.

And then the voice says. “This is the one in whom I delight.”

It's like a proud Father beaming over her son saying, “That's my boy!”

These words, “in whom I delight” come from Isaiah 42:1 and identify Jesus as the “suffering servant” through whom God will mount his rescue operation in order to bring Israel out of exile and forgive her sins.

If you look at the rest of Isaiah 42, you see what this servant in whom God delights will do. Isaiah 42 is one of Isaiah's so called servant songs.

- He will be a covenant to the Gentiles -- through him the Gentiles will find a bridge into Israel and

into fellowship with God. They will be offered inclusion in the covenant.

- He'll be a light to all peoples.
- He'll smash the idols of the nations.
- He'll deal with the rebellious within Israel.

He is the prophesied servant of the Lord, the chosen one in whom the Father rejoices!

So we now see how Jesus' baptism identifies him to the world. It is truly an Epiphany. He is King, Sacrifice, and Servant. He is God's appointed ruler, the one whose death will bring forgiveness, and the servant of the Lord through whom God's covenant plan and victory come to fruition.

These three strands of OT prophecy and expectation are all intertwined here at the baptism of Jesus. They're rolled together to show the promises find their yes and Amen in him. The Father reveals that Jesus is the Greater David, the Greater Isaac, and the suffering servant.

In other words, the baptism of Jesus is just the gospel. It's the gospel in compressed form. It has to be unpacked. But it's all there.

His baptism is the gospel, because when Jesus submits to baptism he does so for us and for our salvation.

His baptism is the basis of our baptisms.

And as with Jesus, so with us: Baptism gives us our identity.

God has given you baptism so that you can answer that question: "Who am I?"

Baptism is the answer to your identity crisis because what the Father said to and about the Son at his baptism is what he says to and about you at your baptism!

He says to you: "You are My Beloved Son! My soul delights in you!" He speaks to you from heaven and pours out his Spirit upon you.

That's the Father's promise to you in its baptism, that's what he offers to you. This is what he gives you, to be received by faith. Think about an analogy: If I trust the promises my wife made to me on our wedding day, I never have to wonder, "Does she love me?" because I've got those promises to hang onto. The promises give me an identity: I am loved by this person; I belong to this person.

And if you trust in what God did for you at baptism, you never have to wonder: "Does God love me?" Just look to your baptism, to promises it contains. Look at yourself through the lens of the baptismal water. When you ask yourself, "Who am I?" hear God's answer: "You are my beloved child!" God tells you who you are in baptism. Accept that identity and live accordingly.

That's why whenever Martin Luther doubted God's love, he'd tell himself, "Martin you are baptized! Away with all doubting." He clung to the promise made in the water. He found his truest and deepest identity not in his sins and failings but in the covenant of baptism. He was a sinner, yes, but a forgiven sinner, a washed sinner, a renewed sinner.

This is why John Calvin included in his children's catechism these questions--

Are you a child of God?

“Yes.”

How do you know?

The child answers, “Because I am baptized in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

Baptism is all about Christian identity, it’s all about assurance. Baptism tells who you are on good days and on bad days; on days when you feel good spiritually and on days when you don’t. Experience in the Christian life ebbs and flows -- but whenever you have one of those “dark nights of the soul,” God throws you a rope in the form of baptism. Baptism is objective; it’s an event that happened outside, and to you. It’s truth and promises do not fluctuate. It’s *always* a solid offer of forgiveness and new life. Baptism calls us to simply believe that God is who he says he is that we are who he says we are. It calls to us to simply accept what he says and promises as true. To live as a baptized person is to know that God’s declaration over you is the most absolute, deepest truth about you. If your struggles and doubts make like seem like a sheer cliff wall, baptism is a solid foothold that enable you to keep climbing upward in faith.

In baptism, by faith, we hear the Father speaking to us, we see heaven opening to us, and we experience the Spirit coming upon us as a dove. Jesus’ baptism was a unique event – and yet it also serves as the paradigm for understanding every single Christian baptism ever performed. By receiving baptism, we become sharers in the realities of his baptism.

Now, to be sure, baptism brings with it certain obligations. It’s no coincidence that right after his baptism, Jesus faces temptation. The real question in his confrontation with Satan is: Will Jesus be true to the identity the Father has given him? Will he be true to his baptism? Or will he betray that identity? Will he live like a true Son? Or will he live like an orphan and try to grab the status that (in reality) he already has?

And that’s our situation as well -- we’re baptized; God has been gracious to us; he has showered us with gifts; he’s brought us into his family and into the new creation; he has washed us; he has poured out the Spirit on us; he has spoken to us.

But now we have to live in accord with all these things. We have to be faithful. We have to live like sons. We have to accept what God says about us – and a lot of times, that will mean rejecting what others may say about you, or even what your own heart tells you. Let God’s baptismal word be true, even if it means the world is full of liars.

Baptism not only includes a promise of who we are; it is also a promise of who we will be. Jesus’ baptism pointed ahead not only to his cross, but also to his resurrection. We have to not only “be who we are” as sons of God. We also have to “be who we will be,” living the life of the future resurrection, in principle, in the present. Baptism shapes the whole Christian life, from beginning to end. At baptism, you become a member of God’s family. After baptism, you spend the whole rest of you life learning to live accordingly.

In other words, part of living by faith is internalizing the meaning of your baptism – it’s living in such a way that your life is one giant “Amen!” to your baptism. It’s embracing your new status as a child of the heavenly Father and the calling to walk worthily of that new status.

Baptism is God’s gift. Baptism is God’s work. Baptism is God’s promise.

Believe God's promise; believe what he declared over you at your baptism. Run back to it when you have doubts, and live in light of those promises, as one of God's beloved children.

Let's pray and ask for God's help.