

Mark 1:4-11

Baptism of Jesus- January 7, 2024

If you could meet anyone from the Bible, other than Jesus, who would it be? Who do you think would be the most interesting person to talk to? I'm sure Adam, the first person ever created, Moses the prophet, Samson the mighty warrior, Solomon the wise king, Paul or Peter, Ruth, Mary the mother of Jesus would be great options. If I had to give mine, it would be John the Baptist. I wish I could have seen him preach- and not just so I can take some of his ideas. He must have been remarkable. He wore camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey- meaning that in order to eat honey, he would have to stick his hand in a live beehive. But he also must have been an incredible preacher, and his message must have been compelling because people would go out twenty miles into the Judean wilderness to listen to him. And they were moved! They didn't walk away from his preaching saying, "Wow, that gave me a lot to think about." They believed what he was saying! When he told them that they all needed to repent- confess their sins and fall on God's mercy for forgiveness, they did! And the distinctive thing about John's ministry was, you guessed it, Baptism. And that's what we are talking about today. **Baptism Means a New You:** And the three questions I'd like to dig into with you are these: **1. What does Baptism do? 2. Where does it get this power? 3. Why is this still relevant?**

1. What does Baptism Do? Much of what we need to know is already here in this text. Baptism comes from the greek "Baptizo"- to wash with water in a ceremonial way. That wasn't actually foreign to the Jewish believers. If a non-Jewish person wanted to convert to the Jewish faith, they would have to be ceremonially washed because they are spiritually dirty and needed to be cleansed. This reflects a very common picture used in the Old Testament- the concept of clean/unclean. The truth that God taught his people is that all people are spiritually dirty because of their sin, and in order to be in the presence of a holy God, they need to get rid of their spiritual filth and stay away from spiritually unclean things. John the Baptist comes on the scene, then, and says what God was saying the whole time- "All of us are spiritually unclean, all of us are filthy and sinful, and all of us, Jews and Gentiles, good and bad, religious and nonreligious, tax collectors and Pharisees, rich and poor, man and woman, need to be cleansed if they want to stand in God's holy presence." So John preaches a "Baptism of repentance that grants the forgiveness of Sins." What exactly does that mean?

This is a Baptism of repentance. Repentance, in the Greek quite literally means to change one's mind or ways. The idea is that someone is thinking a certain way, acting a certain way, living a certain way, and by the grace of God they realize they are wrong, and they go to God and say, "I've been wrong and I want to be good, I want to be holy, I want to be with you." That's what Baptism, and Christianity itself is all about. Repentance! Our entire Christian lives are supposed to be saturated in repentance because we are constantly sinning, constantly breaking God's law, and many times when I do the right thing, it's not really for God, but for me. The stature of the Christian is on one's knees repenting to our God, saying "Lord have mercy." And God's answer to that cry for mercy, every single time, is "yes"- and in different ways. The Baptism that John was preaching was about repentance, and when people repented and asked for God's grace, they received it and their sins were washed away- quite literally. Forgiveness in Greek means "taken away." The picture is that when you break God's law and do something wrong, it sticks to you, you have blood on your hands, dirt on your face, however you want to think about it. Forgiveness means that sin is taken away- as we see in the Psalms- as far as the East is from the West. And all of that comes in Baptism. Baptism is not simply a symbol for what's happening on the inside or an act of obedience to God, but it is God actually forgiving and wiping your sins away. And look at what Mark

says, John was “preaching” Baptism. The Greek there is a little clunky- it doesn’t say he was preaching about Baptism, just preaching Baptism. What Mark is subtly doing here is showing the intimacy between preaching Jesus’ Gospel and Baptism. What I mean is this: The forgiveness of your sins and your salvation was earned for you when Jesus died on the Cross. And the way that becomes individually yours, the way that Jesus makes you his child on an individual level and gives you that salvation- is what we call the “Means of Grace.” These are the ways God communicates to you, preaches to you about what Jesus has done, and through that communication the Holy Spirit creates faith, and that’s how you’re saved. He does this through the Word when it’s read in the Scriptures and preached by God’s servants, like John, but he also does this through Baptism. Baptism isn’t simply an expression of the Gospel, or a sign of the Gospel- it is the Gospel- it is God using something as simple as Water to communicate his powerful saving work for you, forgiving your sins, and making you his. That’s what Baptism does- but how does it have this power?

2. Because of what Jesus did. The assumption that most people had when they were baptized by John was, “This John guy is something special.” He was. He was direct, fiery, harsh, and confrontational. But he wasn’t arrogant- he admitted that he was just as sinful as anyone else and that the one who came after him, Jesus, was so great and holy that John wasn’t even worthy to take off his sandals. John could apply the water, but he himself could not give the spiritual benefits or the forgiveness of sins or the Holy Spirit. He baptized with water, but in that baptism, Jesus is the one who provides the spiritual benefits. How?

In *his* Baptism. Perhaps you were wondering this when we read the text- If Baptism is for the forgiveness of Sins, why is Jesus getting baptized? He doesn’t have any sin to forgive. But there he goes, and when he’s baptized, something marvelous happens. The Holy Trinity appears- God the Holy Spirit comes down from Heaven and rests on Jesus and God the Father booms from Heaven- quoting Psalm 2, which is itself a quote of what the Father says to the Son in eternity- “You are my son whom I love, with you I am well pleased.” What’s going on here? The Holy Trinity making an appearance that has never been seen before- all persons of the Trinity appearing in an obvious way and expressing their love for each other. The Spirit descends on Jesus in a comforting, loving way. The Father expresses his joy and love in his Son. And the Son willingly, humbly, and gladly submits himself to the will of his Father. How is doing that? When Jesus is getting baptized, he is identifying himself with every sinner and taking on every sin upon his own shoulders. He is beginning his saving work as our substitute in an official way and beginning his 3 year journey to the Cross. He is becoming every sinner so that he could live the perfect life that all sinners didn’t live, so that when he is punished, every sinner could be forgiven. The power of Baptism comes from the finished work of Jesus and the fact that because Jesus identified with your sinfulness and was punished for it, in baptism you and I are identified with Christ himself and are therefore accepted and embraced as if we were Christ. The same love and fellowship that Jesus himself enjoys within the Holy Trinity is given to us in Baptism. Paul says it in Romans- we died with Christ and were raised with Christ- meaning that we are treated by God as if we were already punished for every single one of our sins. In other words- Jesus entered the waters of Baptism clean and left dirty, so that when we enter the water dirty, we leave clean, new, in fact, a new person, a new you.

3. Why is this relevant? You’ve probably heard it the past week- “New Year, New Me!” At the beginning of January, everyone attempts to start new habits and change themselves into better people by going to the gym, reading more books, giving up bad habits, eating healthier, and the phrase I hear so often is “New Year, new me.” I find that phrase fascinating for this reason: It reflects the fundamental human desire for identity. “Who am I?” That is the one question every single one of us asks ourself in one way or another. And our lives are defined by how we try to answer that question. Who am I? Our modern culture

has told us that who you are, your identity, must be found within. The goal of life, according to modern philosophy and the average Disney kids movie is that you must liberate yourself from all restrictions, fulfill all your curiosities and desires, and find yourself so that you can truly be your true self:

*“It's funny how some distance makes everything seem small
And the fears that once controlled me can't get to me at all
It's time to see what I can do
To test the limits and break through
No right, no wrong, no rules for me
I'm free.”*

Those are lyrics from the hit children's movie “Frozen,” and whether we know it or not, society is indoctrinating us and our children to believe that the meaning of life is finding yourself and your identity. If it means that you disobey your parents, like every Disney princess, so be it! If it means you leave your spouse and your family and cause untold emotional damage to those who depend on you, so be it! You must find yourself and be yourself so you can have your true identity. Here's the problem. Not only is that mindset radically self-absorbed, not only does this cause endless damage to people, not only does this cause damage to the individual because human beings have a tendency to desire things that are bad for them, this idea also doesn't work. You can't find an identity in yourself. Human beings crave acceptance and belong- that's how we're built. The problem is that if your identity is built off of your belonging to a group, a family, a club, your identity rises and falls based on your performance. For example, if your identity is built on the fact that you are a hard-working person, what happens the day you aren't able to work hard anymore? If your identity is built on the fact that you belong to an elite group of successful people, or a family, or a group of friends, what happens when that group rejects you? If your identity is that you are a farmer, a blue collar worker, an intellectual, or successful business person, a wife, a mother, what happens if you don't perform that function well? Your identity implodes. What we need, and our entire culture as well, is an identity that is based on an acceptance that we don't earn. And In baptism, God himself declares, “This is my child, I'm pleased with you, I love you.” That is your identity, and it can't be taken away because you didn't earn it, it was given to you as a free gift.

The reason I just told you all of that is for this reason: What we have in this community of believers is something every person is desperately looking for- they just don't know it. Everyone is looking for an identity, everyone is looking for belonging, everyone is looking for a new self- and that is exactly what Jesus grants when he baptizes. A new belonging. A new family. A new identity. A new forgiveness. A new you. Amen.