

“Baptized in the Name of the Lord Jesus”

Mark 1:4-11; Acts 19:1-7

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January 10, 2021 • Baptism of the Lord

It has been a tragic week here in the United States, tragic for our nation and for our reputation in the eyes of countries around the globe that have long looked to us as a model of what a democracy should be. I debated whether to offer you some reflections on what I believe should happen next, and I decided not to. I will say, however, that history will remember this moment. There have only been two times in our nation’s history when the United States Capitol has been breached by force. The other time was by British soldiers during the War of 1812 – more than *two hundred years ago*. This time, it was done by *citizens of the United States*. That ought to give us pause. Schoolchildren will be reading about what happened on Wednesday a hundred, *two hundred*, maybe *three* hundred years from now, assuming our democracy survives that long. I do have some thoughts about a variety of things relating to what happened on Wednesday that I am considering sharing with you in a series of newsletter articles, as conversation starters. One thing that I think we might all agree on is that we, as a society, need to get better at talking about important issues in more constructive, less divisive, less violent ways.

So let’s try, if we can, to set aside the traumatic events of this week. Let us acknowledge that it happened, that it is tragic, that our nation is going to be dealing with the after-effects of what happened for months or years to come; let us pray for wisdom and prudence on the part of our government’s leaders; let us pray for the families and friends of the victims; let us pray for a swift and fair execution of justice; let us pray that those who are prone to violence will find better ways of raising their concerns; let us pray for the preservation and promotion of truth in all things; let us pray that God would grant us wisdom and courage to do whatever we can in our respective spheres of influence to promote democracy, truth, justice, and goodwill ... and let us turn our attention now to the *Gospel* of Jesus Christ.

Today is, in our church liturgical year, Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Every year, the Sunday after Epiphany, we recall the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River at the hands of John the Baptist. It is also, by extension, a good day for us to recall our *own* baptisms, and their lasting significance in our lives.

Jesus was not, of course, the first person ever baptized. There were many people who were baptized by John before Jesus came down to the river. We don’t know who was the first person to ever be baptized. There is no mention of baptism in the Old Testament, but it is possible that there were other people offering it before John. What is clear is that John was the first person to baptize large numbers of people. Outside of the New Testament, John is also mentioned by Josephus, the first-century Jew who wrote a massive history of the Jewish people for a Roman audience. Josephus described John as “a good man” who “commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the

remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body.” Josephus says that there were many people who came “in crowds about him, for they were greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words.” All of this is very consistent with what the New Testament has to say about John. Here, clearly, was a man who motivated and inspired a large number of people to live a life of virtue and devotion to God, turning from their wayward paths, and marking their renewed commitment with a symbolic washing in the river Jordan. All of this was happening *before* Jesus arrives on the scene. John was giving people an opportunity to say, “I want to live a *completely different life* than the one I have been living.”

So then comes the day when 30-year-old Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. This is the very first story in the gospels about Jesus as an adult. Now you might be wondering, why would *Jesus* need to be baptized? Why would *he* need to change his whole course of life? Good question; in Matthew’s version of this story, John initially refuses to baptize Jesus, saying to him: “I need to be baptized by *you*, and do *you* come to *me*?” To which Jesus replies: “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus clearly knew something John didn’t; Jesus understood that this was part of the divine plan. So they step out into the Jordan River – it’s not very wide, nor very deep; I’ve stepped out into it myself – and John gently immerses Jesus down into the waters, covering him from the tips of his toes to the top of his head, and brings him up again. In the moment when Jesus re-emerges from the water, something happens that hasn’t happened before, in any of the other baptisms that John has performed. As Mark puts it, Jesus “saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” Jesus also hears a voice, coming from the heavens: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” It’s not clear if all the people standing nearby on the shore saw what Jesus saw or heard what Jesus heard – although in Matthew’s version of the story, the voice does not say “*You* are my Son,” but rather, “*This* is my Son, the Beloved, *with whom* I am well pleased” – and in John’s version of the story, John the Baptist says “*I saw* the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.” So it would seem that, at the very least, *John* was able to testify to what had happened to Jesus, in the waters of the Jordan, in the waters of baptism.

So a few things happen in that moment that had not happened with anybody else whom John baptized. Jesus receives an abundantly clear identity from God. In recent years I have been inclined to think that *Jesus himself may not have known or fully understood his true identity as the Beloved Son of God until this moment*. He’s been an adult for a long time now, and *nothing noteworthy has happened* – no teachings, no miracles, no exorcisms – he was just living life as an ordinary Jew in an obscure town. Something compels him to go to the Jordan River, and when he is there, *BOOM!*, God speaks, and bestows upon him this identity that he may or may not have truly believed that he had until right then. With this identity comes the *Holy Spirit of God*. The implication is that Jesus wasn’t endowed with the Holy Spirit – at least not fully – until *this very moment*. Jesus comes out of the Jordan a *changed man*. And the gates of hell know it. *Immediately* the Holy Spirit sends Jesus out into the desert wilderness. He spends *forty whole days* out there, being tempted by Satan. Satan knows that Jesus is now a force to be reckoned with – *in a way that he hadn’t been before*. Jesus’ baptism is what launches Jesus’ ministry.

Baptism has been a rite of initiation into the Christian faith ever since. There are, of course, two different ways it is done: the “sprinkling” method, and the “immersion” method. There are also differing opinions about *when* it should be done: as an infant or young child, for children of believers, as a sign and seal of our cleansing, our grafting into Christ, and our welcome into the household of God, *even before we have any understanding of what any of that means*; or as a teenager or adult, after reaching an age at which we can choose this faith of our own volition; “believers’ baptism,” as it is

called. Presbyterians, like Methodists and Catholics and many other Christian traditions, have historically favored infant baptism, and sometimes defended it with elaborate and sophisticated theological arguments in heated debates, but I can certainly see the biblical argument for “believers’ baptism.” I spent two years in college attending an American Baptist Church, and if providence had led me in a slightly different direction, I might have ended up in that world. There are also those who view baptism as a “Sacrament,” and those who don’t; and those who say you can only receive it once, while others who say you can keep going back to the water every time you feel moved by the Spirit to do so. Honestly, I don’t think these are battles worth fighting over, though they can lead to fascinating conversations. One thing we *all* agree on is the central importance of baptism in the Christian faith.

We also all agree that the presence of the Holy Spirit is *vital* for a baptism to be “real” in the life of a believer. You can be washed in the waters of baptism, you can dedicate or re-dedicate your life to God, you can even make promises to God to radically change your life around, *but if the Holy Spirit isn’t present in all that*, your baptism is missing the most important element. The most essential ingredient in baptism is *not water*. The most essential ingredient is *the Holy Spirit*. That Holy Spirit comes to us through our *faith* in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not sufficient to simply make promises to God, not sufficient to simply dedicate your life to God. John gave people the opportunity to do those things at the Jordan River. Those were *good*, but Jesus offers something *better*. We see this in the story from the book of Acts. Paul discovers that some of the early Christians had been baptized but hadn’t received the Holy Spirit. They hadn’t received the Spirit because they hadn’t placed their *faith* in Jesus Christ. They had made promises to God, had dedicated their lives to God, like the people who came to John, but they didn’t realize that there was something *else* for them to do. So Paul explains to them the difference between the baptism that John offered and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. Both involve promises to God; both involve dedicating your life to God. But only one of them involves *placing your trust in the name of Jesus Christ*. Only one involves *offering your life to Jesus Christ*. Only one results in you receiving the Holy Spirit – and the *power* that comes with it. When those disciples who had been baptized in John’s baptism received a new baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, they suddenly found themselves empowered with gifts and abilities from the Spirit that they hadn’t had before.

In our tradition, a person who has been baptized as a child places their trust in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and offers their life to Jesus when they are *confirmed*, typically as a teenager. They “confirm” the vows that were made over them when they were baptized. When that happens – when they make their *own* profession of faith in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ – *that’s* the moment when they *truly* receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. That’s the moment when their baptism is truly *complete*.

For many of us, both of those events – baptism and confirmation – are long ago in the past. The question is, *is the Holy Spirit still active in your life, NOW*, all these many years later? Do you still feel the *gifts* and the *power* of the Holy Spirit in your life? *How’s your faith?* Are you still committed to placing your whole *faith* and *trust* in the Lord Jesus? Or has your commitment and zeal waned over time? Are you still ready and willing to let Christ be the Lord of your life? Or is your heart full of excuses not to?

There’s only one way to continue receiving the gifts and the power of the Holy Spirit as you go through the various stages of life. It involves wholehearted commitment. It involves *faith* and *trust*.

Are you willing to give Jesus your *heart*? Your *whole* heart? Right here, right now?

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