

Shepherd of the Mountains

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The First Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord
The Baptism of Jesus
January 7, 2018

“A Sinner’s Baptism”

Text: Mark 1:10-11

“*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. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’*”

“*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the (newborn) Lord Jesus Christ*” (Philippians 1:2).

Uh, . . . you *missed* a little bit.

We missed a little bit.

Yes - believe it or not - we should have *been* here - here *in church* - a few more times the last few weeks! I know; for some of you, if we kept track of attendance here on one of those old punch cards you used to get for repeated visits to your favorite restaurants or coffee bar, yours would already be *full*! And yet, I’m here to *tell* you - I *have* to tell you this morning - even *you* have *missed* a lot. Even just in the last *week*!

You missed *Epiphany*. (This morning’s worship folder was your *first clue*, wasn’t it - “The First Sunday *after* [emphasis added] the Epiphany”?) And we missed it *with* you,

of course. Missed it by a day! Yesterday. January 6th. The day after the twelfth - and *final* - day of *Christmas*. The Epiphany *of our Lord*. The “*revealing*” that is - or “*making known*” - of our Lord. For Epiphany celebrates the wise men coming to visit the Christ child, and, by their gifts of gold, and frankincense and myrrh, “*revealing*” - in an *epiphany*, if you will - Jesus to the world as Lord and King.

So, yes, you missed Epiphany; but *earlier* in the week, you also missed New Year’s *Day*, *too*. Well, not *New Year’s Day* here in the *church*, but “The Name of Jesus,” “The Circumcision of Jesus.” For on New Year’s Day - on the eighth day after Jesus was born - the church celebrates the very first time our Savior places Himself under the Law for us sinners - the first time He sheds His blood for us.

This morning, the same thing happens. Except it’s the *second* time, of course, our Savior Jesus places Himself under the Law for us sinners. And except there’s no shedding of blood. However, there *is* a pretty good *dunking*, from the way Mark records it for us.

The First Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord. The Baptism of Jesus. Watch for the “epiphany.” Listen for the “revealing,” the “showing,” the “making known,” of the One born to be the “Savior” of the world, “*Christ our Lord*” (Lk. 2:11).

We’re in Mark this morning. *You* know Mark. Mr. Gospel-in-a-hurry. Mr. Can’t-get-the-story-of-Jesus-out-fast-enough.

You *remember* Mark - the *beginning* of Mark - from less than a month ago, from back on the Second Sunday of Advent:

“*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’*”

The beginning of the *preaching* of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But of course *Isaiah* wasn't the one who kicked *that* off; *John* was! John the Baptizer. John the Baptist. The who one who "*appeared*," "*baptizing*" and "*proclaiming*." Oh, but let me let *Mark* tell you:

4 *John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

Oh, *John appeared*, all right - looking for all the world like *Elijah the prophet*! *Elijah the prophet*, who "*wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist*" (2 Kings 1:8). *Elijah the prophet*, who didn't really die, but rather "*went up by a whirlwind into heaven*" (2 Kings 2:11)? *Elijah the prophet*, who - on the basis of *Malachi 4:5-6*, "*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse*" - was expected to return before "*the day of the Lord*" as the herald of the Messiah.

So, *John appeared*, all right - and he got right to work doing *two* things out "*in the wilderness*," outside the Holy City of Jerusalem: "*baptizing*" and "*proclaiming*." Proclaiming a *baptism*. Proclaiming a *baptism of repentance*. Proclaiming a *baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*.

Okay, so would somebody please tell us what that all *means*, right? What does *John's baptism* have to do with *repentance*? And what do his *baptizing* and *proclaiming* have to do with the *forgiveness of sins*?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, *some* days it's good to be a Lutheran. And *other* days, it's nothing short of *great*! For what Lutherans like to do when Scripture is confusing is to look up *more* scripture. What Lutherans like to do when scripture is confusing is to let the *clear* word of *some* passages shine light on the seemingly-fuzzy word of those *others*.

Others like *this* one, that we have this Epiphany morning. Others like *this* one, that we have from St. Mark.

"*John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*"

Now *John* wasn't the only one in history *baptizing*. *John* wasn't the only one plunging people into and under water, that is. The *Jews* had a baptism - for proselytes who came to faith in the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob later in life. And the well-known community at Qumran famously had a baptism, too. Only *that* baptism was a *ritual* baptism; it was for *ritual* purity; it didn't have anything to do with *spiritual* purity or the forgiveness of sins. And it certainly wasn't a "one-time" baptism like *John's*; oft times *that* baptism was called for on a *daily* basis. And as for the *Jews* baptizing those later converts to Judaism, the first we hear about any of *that* is a hundred years *after* *John the Baptizer*, well into the *second* century.

So here comes *John*, basically doing what no one's ever done before - "*baptizing*" and "*proclaiming a baptism of repentance*" "*for the forgiveness of sins.*"

Now how often do we hear people say - after a hard day or a long night - that a good washing with water is just the thing? "I feel like a new man" after a nice hot shower! "I feel like a new women" after a nice long bath."

Well, that's the way "*the LORD GOD*" (e.g. Ezek. 36:22) talks about a good "*washing*" with water in the Old Testament, too. *His* washing makes people new. *His* act of cleansing results in a change of heart or mind or attitude.

For example, in *Ezekiel* He says to "*the House of Israel*," "*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you*" (36:25). And from the *Psalms*, in one we likely know even better: "*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my trans-*

gressions, and my sin is ever before me. . . Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (2-3, 7).

Clean, clean, 100% clean! And as for the change associated with that “washing”? Listen to the words that immediately follow in both cases. From Ezekiel, “*And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh*” (36:26). And much the same from the Psalmist: “*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me*” (10).

So clearly, baptism and this change of heart - this *repentance* - are directly related - *intimately* related - but we need to look closely at the relationship. We need to be sure we get “first things first,” as we say. For it’s not the *change*, and then the *cleansing*; it’s the *cleansing*, and then the *change*! It’s not, to put it in baptismal terms, to put it in the terms Paul put it in to his protégé Titus, first the change - the *repentance* - and then “*the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*” (Titus 3:5). It’s *the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*” (Titus 3:5), and only *then* the change of heart, the *repentance*. For it’s the *cleansing* - and only the *cleansing* - that brings about the change!

For, let’s be Lutheran one more time since only *we* ever get to *do* that! Let’s look at what Matthew clearly - *clearly!* - says John the Baptizer says: “*I baptize you with water for repentance, . . .*” (3:11).

“For [emphasis added] *repentance!*” Could the hairy one with the hairball diet *be* any *clearer*? Repentance is the *goal* - it’s the desired *result*, it’s the intended *purpose* - of his baptizing!

And so that we don’t get confused in all this talk of “*John’s* baptism,” let’s circle back to who’s really at work in baptism; let’s look one more time at who’s responsible for all

that *cleansing*. Clearly not the one *being cleansed* - and that despite what you so often hear, that despite what other brothers and sisters in Christ so often teach. God “*the LORD GOD*” in the *Old Testament* the same as He does here in the *New* - *washes, cleanses, and makes clean!* And in that *very act* of His, He brings about the necessary *change* - the necessary *change of heart* - the *repentance* - as well.

Oh, and it is *repentance*; all right - that “*repentance.*” For a repentant heart is - as Isaiah prophesied about John as “*the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight’*” - the only “*way*” the Lord Jesus can “*travel*”; it’s the only “*path*” on which the promised Messiah can bring His salvation. *Unrepentance* will stand in His way. *Unrepentance* will block His path.

Now, according to St. Mark, very little was standing in the way as John was “*baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” - “. . . *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*” (1:4-5).

Why the *“River Jordan”*? It may well be, because that’s where - under the leadership of Moses’ successor Joshua - Israel at long last crossed over into “the Promised Land,” the land “*flowing with milk and honey*” (Ex. 33:3). Likewise here - here at the Jordan, as it were - in *Baptism - by baptism, through baptism* - God’s *latter day* saints, His *new* Israel, will at long last cross over into “the Promised Land” of life in His Kingdom, the land flowing with all the *spiritual* milk and honey blessings of His heavenly reign.

Not that “*John’s*” baptism and Jesus’ were the same, of course. *John* - *literally* - was the first to *admit* it:

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.”*

Oh, John's baptism was "*for the forgiveness of sins,*" all right. As John washed people in the river Jordan in baptism, He washed them of their sins. For where there is repentance there is forgiveness.

Yet the baptism of John was but preparatory; it prepared people for the coming of their Lord, "the Mightier One" - who, in the "*baptism*" that He would "*be baptized with*" (Lk. 12:50) at *Calvary* - by the cross and by the tomb - would take all those sins so far away that on Judgment Day not even the Father Himself would be able to find them.

However, before *that* one Jesus would undergo this baptism of John. And forget about everything you hear today about a "*believer's*" baptism; this was a *sinner's* baptism, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Just as He did at His circumcision, Jesus here again placed Himself under the Law . . . for us. He identified with us in our sinful condition. He became one of us.

And it pleased the Father to no end, didn't it? That's the thing that made Him so proud, right? That's the reason He erupted the way He did the moment Jesus "*came up out of the water*": "*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.*"

Here, "*the heavens [were] torn open.*" But there on *Calvary*, the curtain of the temple would be torn in two (Mt. 27:51). But they both signify the same thing, don't they: In this Jesus, the barrier that separated God from man from man's very first sin has been broken. Peace has come in the Prince of Peace.

That's why the Spirit is on the scene, too, isn't it? Go back to Genesis. Go back to our OT lesson this morning. If you're one of our confirmands, go back to confirmation: the God who *creates* is the God who *re-creates*! *By His Holy Spirit!* The Spirit's here to tell us that this whole baptism thing is just one more act of *creation* - one *new* act of creation. Just as the Spirit hovered - can we say, like a "*dove*" -

over the face of those yet-unformed waters at creation, so the Spirit "hovers" here over this new 'Adam' - the One in whom once again the Creator's original intent for human beings can be realized. And the way that happens is that that same "*Spirit*" hovers over the face of *these* - pointing to you and to me and all the baptized - yet-unformed formed "waters" at *re-creation* - as we by water and the word are *re-created* into the likeness of Christ our Lord!

Yes, when we are baptized into Christ, well, just as Jesus identified with us in our sinfulness through *His* Baptism - a sinner's baptism - so we in *our* Baptism identify with *Him* in all his *sinlessness*! The way Paul says it to the Galatians is, "*as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ*" (3:27). Have taken *off our unrighteousness*, that is, and put *on His* perfect *righteousness*.

And just as He received the Holy Spirit in Baptism, so we in our baptism receive the Holy Spirit, just as John promised: "*The stronger one than I*" [who] "*is coming after me*" - "*whose sandal thong I am not able to seep down and untie - will baptize you in/with the Holy Spirit*" (Mark, 1:7-8).

Now we had quite the little *after-baptism* party at *our* house two weeks ago following Baby *Ellie's* baptism. And not to take anything away from *Jesus's* baptism here, but this little after-baptism party is really important to us in this season of Epiphany. In fact, you might call it one of the *pillars* of Mr. Mark's gospel. For it answers the all-important question: "Just exactly who *is* this Jesus?"

And the Father Himself could not be any more clear, could He? "*You are my beloved Son.*" - my one-and-only, my *only-begotten* (Jn. 3:16) Son. You are Messiah. You are the Redeemer of the world" - by baptism into whose name, you and I, alienated from our Father in heaven by our sin, can hear those saving words spoken to us: "*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.*"

Thanks be to God. Amen.