

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

John the Baptist. He's the scruffy looking character on the cover of today's worship folder pouring water over the head of Jesus. John the Baptist. His clothes were made of camel's hair and he wore a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. John the Baptist. He was none other than the "voice" prophesied by Isaiah (Isaiah 40:3) "the voice of one calling in the desert." John the Baptist. He had a knack for saying the morally right thing at the socially wrong time. John called some of the people who came to hear him preach a "brood of vipers." John the Baptist. He's the one who shouted, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!" Despite his strange appearance and his direct way of condemning sin, John also baptized many for the forgiveness of their sins, and he preached the good news that God had pity on this planet and was sending a Savior.

Although John didn't care what people thought about him and he seems to have never been at a loss for words, there was one time in John's ministry when he was perplexed, almost bewildered. Jesus, the Lamb of God himself, came to John to be baptized. Matthew's gospel tells us that John tried to stop Jesus, saying, *"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"* (Matthew 3:14). From what John knew about Jesus, baptism didn't seem to fit him. Jesus was the sinless Son of God. Baptism was for sinners. John also knew that he himself was a sinner in need of God's love and forgiveness. What right did he have to baptize Jesus? It made much more sense for Jesus to baptize John instead of the other way around.

John the Baptist's statement about his own need for baptism and his question about Jesus' need for baptism are the two points we consider this morning. Why did Jesus need to be baptized? Why is baptism something we need?

From our Gospel Lesson for today, we listen again to the words of Luke 3:21:

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Why did Jesus need to be baptized? As "people of the Book," we answer any question that we have about one part of the Bible by looking at the rest of the Bible for answers. Why was Jesus baptized? The logical answer would be that he needed it. He was in need of forgiveness. But that answer doesn't fit with the rest of Scripture. Hebrews 4:15 (NIV) tells us that Jesus was *"tempted in every way, just as we are yet was without sin."* 1 John 3:5 (NIV) says of Jesus, *"... in him is no sin."* 1 Peter 1:19 (NIV) tells us that Jesus is the lamb of God (the sacrifice for sin) *"without blemish or defect."* So if Jesus wasn't a sinner and didn't need baptism for the forgiveness of sins, then why was he baptized?

If you looked in a mirror this morning you saw the reason. As you look at me and I look at you, we see why Jesus was baptized. Jesus' baptism was done for us sinful humans. Jesus' baptism identified him with the world of sinners. By being baptized like a sinner, Jesus showed his willingness to become the substitute for sinners. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says to John, *"... it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness. . ."* (Matthew 3:15 NIV). This act by Jesus was part of what we call his "active

obedience.” It is part of the holiness, the sinlessness, the perfection, the righteousness that Jesus earned with his perfect life while here on earth. This ‘righteousness’ is what God, in his great exchange, swaps for the sinfulness of mankind at the cross. So Jesus was baptized like a sinner to serve sinners as their substitute and to maintain his perfection, his righteousness which is credited to each believer through faith.

“Jesus was baptized too.” At the Jordan River two thousand years ago the Son of God received the same baptism as the tax collectors and the prostitutes. The same water that was used to baptize those, separated from God because of their sins, was used to baptize the one who brought sinners back to God. The baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins that soldiers and shopkeepers, husbands and wives, young and old received, was also given to Jesus.

Although we are living many years after John did his baptizing, if you look carefully, you can see yourself in the crowd that came out to him. Like them we have broken every one of God’s Commandments. Like the soldiers who came to John, we haven’t always been content with what we receive in life. We have grumbled about our job and complained about our pay. What’s the difference between the cheating done by the tax collectors and the cheating that is done today by tax payers? By our sexual sins, through indecent thoughts, through impure words and innuendo, through the graphic filth some enjoy on the internet, we too have been guilty of sexual sins like the prostitutes who came to John the Baptist. We have even harbored the pride and arrogance of the Pharisees who rejected John’s baptism. Yes, you and I also stand at the Jordan River with the stream of sinners called humanity.

Thankfully Jesus stepped into that stream. He was baptized like a sinner to serve as the sinners’ Savior. When Jesus was baptized like a sinner, it marked the beginning of his public work as Savior. Although Jesus began living as our substitute when he was conceived in the virgin Mary, he didn’t present himself as the sacrifice for sin until he was in his thirties. And it was at his baptism that he first openly showed his willingness to go to the cross. This explains what happened after Jesus was baptized.

²¹ . . . as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

We are told elsewhere that the Holy Spirit was here bestowing upon Jesus the special gifts he would need to carry out the responsibilities as the Messiah (Acts 10:38). The Holy Spirit’s presence confirmed the fact that, although Jesus was baptized like a sinner he was, in fact, the sinners’ Savior. The voice of God the Father declared to all that he was pleased with the work Jesus would do and that he would accept his sinless Son as their substitute.

Understanding that Jesus was baptized like a sinner to serve as the sinners’ Savior helps us understand John’s words about the baptism for sinners that Jesus provides. We listen again to what John said concerning Jesus.

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. ¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

Not one to soften his words, John clearly stated that he was not the Christ. He also did his job of directing people to Jesus by telling them that Jesus was going to provide a baptism for sinners.

These verses have led some people to question John's baptism. Was it only a symbolic action? Did it have any power? Did it give the forgiveness of sins to those who were baptized? Once again we use God's Word to help us understand this portion of God's Word.

There are three places in the Bible which confirm for us that John's baptism did convey the forgiveness of sins. Mark 1:4 (NIV) tells us, *"And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."* Luke 3:3 (NIV) declares, *"He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."* The Apostle Paul wrote in Acts 19:4 (NIV), *"John's baptism was a baptism of repentance."*

So if John's baptism gave the forgiveness of sins why did he downplay its importance in comparison to the baptism Jesus was going to provide for sinners? Remember, John the Baptist had one purpose in life. He was born to be a human spotlight shining on Jesus and directing people to Jesus. He knew that Jesus would provide a baptism for sinners with additional blessings and greater significance than his.

This is the second important reason for the baptism of Jesus. Joining sinners in baptism gave Jesus the opportunity to provide a baptism for sinners. Galatians 3:26-27 (NIV) explains how the one who was baptized with us, has joined us to himself and conferred his righteousness on us, through the very baptism he has given. *"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."*

What additional blessings did John the Baptist say Jesus would give through his baptism? After his suffering and death for sinners, and after his victory over death, Jesus would baptize his believers with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would equip the followers of Jesus for service. Fifty days after the first Easter, on the Sunday called Pentecost, John's words about the baptism Jesus would provide for sinners came true. On that day the Apostle Peter told the crowd, *"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 NIV). "Jesus was baptized too." When Jesus joined himself to sinners in that way, he opened the way to provide a baptism for sinners that would give us the Holy Spirit.

The baptism that Jesus provided for us has given us the Holy Spirit. Perhaps you've forgotten what that means. Having the Holy Spirit dwelling in you enables and empowers you to live a new life for your Savior. Along with the gift of faith, the Holy Spirit creates the 'New You,' the 'New Adam' in you, which wants to do God's will. It is evident through the "fruits of the Spirit" in your life: *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control."* (Galatians 5:22-23 NIV). Since Jesus was baptized like a sinner he can now provide sinners with a baptism.

John the Baptist also said that Jesus would not only baptize us with the Holy Spirit but he would also baptize us with fire. Throughout Scripture, fire is a symbol of purifying and cleansing. The baptism that Jesus provides for sinners purifies us from our sins. The Apostle Paul explains, *"... all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death . . . We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."* (Romans 6:3-4NIV). You are free to live a new life for Christ.

John continues with the fiery metaphor:

¹⁷ *"His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

John looked right past Jesus' baptism. He looked past his miracles, and his preaching and teaching and even his suffering, death, and resurrection. John looked at the rest of history as the time when Jesus would gather believers. He also looked ahead to the Last Day when Jesus will judge the living and the dead. The harvest of souls still continues as his followers obey his great commission to, *"make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."* (Matthew 28:19 NIV). The baptism Jesus provided for sinners is still bringing sinners to God.

"Jesus was baptized too." On this Sunday when we recall the baptism of Jesus we remember why it happened. Jesus was baptized like a sinner to serve as the sinners' Savior. Joining sinners in baptism gave Jesus the opportunity to provide a baptism to save sinners. Through the baptism he provides, the Holy Spirit conveys not only the Forgiveness of Sins, but also New Life in Christ and Eternal Salvation.

We put our faith in Christ alone and in the baptism he provides. Amen.