

First Sunday after the Epiphany; The Baptism of Our Lord; January 14, 2024

+ Mark 1:4-11 +

“Cherish Jesus’ Baptism, and Yours Too”

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

The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him. They were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. John was clothed in camel’s hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He preached, “One more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals! I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus came up out of the water, 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 Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with you.”

There are a number of days that we cherish, that stick out in our minds and we love to look back on them. For example, if you’re married, hopefully your wedding day qualifies. Because you look back on the day itself (which hopefully went as planned), but then also all the blessings that have followed it. The birthday of a child is like that, too. You remember the day of the actual birth, but also all the blessings the child has brought into your life. Those are the most beautiful days, more beautiful than a vacation or winning an award. Those kinds of events are one-time and then over; the memory is still nice, but the blessing ended on that day. The best days are the days of a blessing that lasts and brings even more blessings behind it.

There are also days we know were blessed, but the memory slips away. Has that ever happened to you? “I know there was something good back there, that day grandpa took me...let’s see, where did he take me again?” This happens more the older you get, but even before you start getting mail from AARP, it starts: “That was great...but what was it, exactly?” The lines blur.

But now think of someone else’s life that you hopefully know well: Jesus’. What would you say are the most memorable days in your Savior’s earthly life? Probably you would start with the first day outside Mary’s womb: Christmas Day. That was memorable, wasn’t it? Shepherds running and cattle lowing (whatever that means) and a manger with a baby and angels singing. That day was memorable and is still remembered; most Christians pull out all the stops for it every year.

What about some of the miracles Jesus performed, showing his divine power and love for his people? Turning water into wine, sending demon-possessed pigs bounding off cliffs, raising the dead, walking on water. They are scenes that stick in the memory, because the Spirit inspired the Gospel writers to press them into the minds of Christians with the words of the Gospels.

The final days of Jesus’ mission also stand out, and they should for believers: his triumphant ride in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, his teachings in the temple courts about the Kingdom of Heaven on Tuesday, his body and blood passed down through the ages to his whole Church on Maundy Thursday, his death to remove our sins from us on Good Friday, his defeat of death on Easter Sunday. These are all days Christians remember and mark during Holy Week, often with their own special worship service.

But where does the day of Jesus' baptism stand in our minds? Don't answer out loud, but did you remember as you travelled to worship today that this First Sunday after Epiphany is the day the Church remembers the day of Jesus' baptism in worship? (If not, you may use the excuse that this is not technically the First Sunday after Epiphany, that was last week. But if that's your excuse I may struggle to believe you.)

Is this because we think Jesus' baptism is unimportant? No! But this sermon comes to you with the purpose of elevating the day of Jesus' baptism in your mind and heart by proclaiming its meaning and impact. The second mission of this message is to elevate the day of your own baptism in your heart and mind. And the goal is to do it by showing you how the blessing Jesus and you received on the day of his baptism is not one of those that happens once and then stops, but a blessing that lasts and stretches forever, and that the blessings you received on the day of your own baptism are right in that same category. Because those are the most beautiful, memorable days: when blessings are received that carry forward through life – and, in this case, life eternal.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' baptism is in the first half of the first chapter. Mark gets a move on. His Gospel is a full-on sprint to Holy Week, with pit stops to show Jesus' power and to make clear his saving mission. And so already in verse nine of his Gospel Mark is turning the focus from John the Baptist to Jesus. John the Baptist was already in heaven by the time Mark wrote his Gospel, but he would have approved of this pace. John the Baptist would have it no other way, because he knew Jesus, not John, is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This brings us to Jesus' baptism. But let's think about yours a bit first. What happens when we bring a person up to this font and with simple, ordinary water, speaking simple-sounding words – "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" – baptize them? Something much more amazing than the ordinary appearance of it! That person's sins are washed away, and the name of the Triune God is written on their hearts. It is a day worth remembering, one that is wrong to forget. And the full reason why takes us back to the banks of the Jordan.

John the Baptist preaches strong messages: one of sin, the need to repent, and also the one who was coming to take that sin away. The word "sin" in verse four pictures an archer shooting an arrow at a target and missing. Whiff! The bullseye is God's standard. This picture calls us archers to think about the misfires, and the times we should have fired but left the arrow in the quiver and didn't even move.

I remember archery in high school gym class. What a disaster that was. People walking in front of the targets and almost getting shot. Arrows flopping into the ground halfway to the target. And I remember Mr. Heckendorf standing behind the whole fiasco with his head down in his shaking hands. There was nothing he could do to stop it, one man trying to beat back the tide of recklessly, dangerously bad archery. So he didn't even try.

God is not powerless to stop our misses, our sins. He gives death, physical and spiritual death, temporal and eternal, to everyone who misses. That is serious. And that is why God, who is love, sent John the Baptist to proclaim repentance for the forgiveness of those sins – to call hearts to turn to God in sorrow, seeking pardon for every damnable miss of the mark.

And that is also why Jesus **came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan**. In another Gospel we hear John the Baptist respectfully object to the notion of Jesus being baptized. But

Jesus assures him it is necessary to fulfill all righteousness. Baptism is God's will for all people, and Jesus needed to be baptized because he came to hit every target dead center bullseye. Baptism was part of the holy life he came to live.

It was a perfect life we cannot live, because we are born in sin. But Jesus was born the holy Son of God. This is what we hear the Father proclaim as Jesus comes up out of the water of baptism: **"You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased."** Jesus hit the mark on baptism. He hit every other mark. And he did it for you and me. God the Father wants you to remember this; he tore open the heavens to announce it! Think of that! He is eager for you to know: this is his holy Son, who has come into the world.

The Spirit was there too in the Jordan River, anointing Jesus with power. It was power Jesus needed, because he was God in a humbled state, a human being. It was power Jesus needed to go out to the wilderness in the very next account of Mark's Gospel, where Jesus shot arrows into Satan's heart by overcoming his temptations. Bullseye, every time. Every time for us; holiness in our place.

In his baptism was power to live perfectly all those final days we remember well: riding into Jerusalem, giving the forgiveness of sins with his body and blood, enduring his passion, dying on the cross to pay for our sins, rising on Easter. Jesus' suffering and death for our sins, his rising for us on Easter, was all empowered by the Spirit in the waters of baptism.

Is Jesus' baptism a day to remember? It is a foundational day in the story of your salvation. It is an act of holiness, fueling a holy life and eternal sacrifice for your sins. Please take the day of Jesus' baptism and slide it up in your soul and in your mind.

Now let's return to the day of your baptism. How can it be true, what you heard about it before? How can a simple looking act with simple sounding words wash away your sins and clothe you in perfection, writing the name of the Triune God on you? The Spirit teaches you how, through the portion of St. Paul's letter to the Romans you heard earlier, among many other places in Scripture.

Baptism is a work. Is it work for a mom and dad to dress up their baby and bring their bundle to the font? Is it work for an adult who has come to faith to drive to church on a Sunday morning and be baptized? Is it work for an usher to fill the font with water, for the pastor to say those words and fill out a lovely baptism certificate? Yeah, there's some little bit of human work in baptism.

But then there's the miraculous work of baptism, the divine work. **Or do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him by this baptism into his death...** Baptism creates or strengthens faith in Jesus. The result is that everything Jesus did in this world becomes yours and mine in baptism. That life that hit every bullseye. That death to atone for our sins. That resurrection to conquer death. It's yours and mine in baptism, because baptism is God's miracle work to give faith in Jesus, and through faith in him all these blessings are ours.

The day of Jesus' baptism is a day to remember because the blessings carry on, through eternity for all believers. The day of your baptism is a day to remember because the blessings you received there last for eternity, as everything Jesus did for all the world became yours! Wherever the day of your baptism currently rests in your heart and brain, slide that day on up, too. It was the day you received blessings that don't just last but last forever – the eternal blessings of Jesus' salvation became yours.

Here is another reason to remember the day of your baptism: The name of the Triune God was written on you at baptism. You are his child. You are a holy and forgiven, fully restored member of God's family. Remember that. When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he played the trick he loves to play. He started a sentence with "if." "If you are the Son of God..." He still pulls that one on Christians. "If you are child of God, how could you think something like that? If you're God's child, how could you miss that mark again, for like the millionth time?" Jesus shut that "if" down. Why? Because he heard his Father say, at his baptism, **"You are my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with you."** God spoke when you were baptized, and called you his child. Remember that, when Satan pulls one of his "ifs" on you. Remember: God has spoken. He has called you his child in Christ. There is no if about it.

And here is one more reason: Jesus used the power of baptism to hit bullseyes and pierce the devil's heart. Your baptism is power for the same purpose. In the love of God, fire straight and true. As Paul explained to the Romans, baptism connects you to Jesus' holy life and death through faith...**so that just as he was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too would also walk in a new life.** Jesus walked out of his tomb to a new life, raised from the dead. Baptism, by God's power, lifts us out of the grave of sin, to walk behind our Savior, to live like our Savior. It is God's power for you to aim for perfection, fire confidently, and hit the target more and more, like your Savior.

Cherish his baptism, for all it did for him and you. Cherish yours, too, for all it did and still does for you. Amen.