

Mark 1:4-11

The Baptism of Our Lord + January 8, 2012
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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In This Together

The Word of the Lord from Mark 1:9: "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. The Scandalous Baptism of Jesus

You're not God. You're far from it. Your old sinful nature will tell you that you're your own god and that you can do whatever you want, but you're a pretty pitiful god who can't do miracles, get rid of your sin or raise yourself from the dead. Get past the fevered boasts of your Old Adam, and there's a huge difference between you and God.

There will be some who disagree. There are pantheists who say that God is everything and everything is God. There will be panentheists who say that God is *in* everything and everything is *in* God. That's the old sinful nature again, whispering like the serpent in Eden that you're divine. But instead of making you look greater, teachings like this really only make God look smaller.

So there's a big difference between God and you. It's not just because of sin. There were differences in the Garden of Eden before the fall into sin. God was the Creator, while Adam and Eve were created beings. Sin only added a greater separation to the differences. God is all-powerful—you're not just less powerful, but weak and failing. God is all-knowing—you have a way of forgetting what little you know. God is the source of all wisdom—you do some pretty foolish things. God is present everywhere—you're here only (though your mind may be elsewhere!). God is eternal—you've got maybe a century in you if all goes exceptionally well. God is holy, righteous, and perfect—you're not and you're not and you're not.

There's a vast gulf between God and man in nature, ability and holiness. This has led many to teach that God could never draw near to man: because He's God, He's going to keep His distance—maybe He *has* to keep His distance. You'll have some who say that since God is good and spirit, and man is sinful and matter; therefore matter must be evil and God could never become flesh. You'll have some who say that since God is infinite and man is finite, God could never become flesh because you can't fit the infinite into the finite. You'll have some who say that since God is spiritual and man is physical, God just doesn't belong in the physical world—you can have Him in your heart, but He can't be in a body. You'll find some who say that God's so great that He's just above it all, and He's not going to get tangled up in the lives and problems of man.

So how close is God going to get? A big part of that question is answered at Christmas: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. In order to be our Savior, the Son of God was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary. That's enough to scandalize a lot of people, this idea that God would become man. But *how* close is God going to get to sinners? The rest of that question is answered in our Gospel lesson today: Jesus will get so close to sinners that it bothers some of His most faithful believers.

John the Baptist is baptizing in the wilderness. He's calling people to repentance. He's declaring to them that their sinfulness separates them from God, that they deserve only judgment and hell for their sins. The people hear this word; and while it's hardly a feel-good sermon, they flock to him. They know there's something wrong, and they're troubled by their sin. They ask what they are to do, and John tells them. He tells them to repent of their sin. He tells them to be baptized. And he tells them that the Savior is coming. He says, "After me comes He who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not

worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

John’s there to preach about the One coming after him. That’s why he’s got the odd fashion sense: he’s outfitted just like the Old Testament prophet Elijah. In Malachi 4, the Lord promised to send an Elijah to announce the coming of the Messiah, and that’s what John is doing in the wilderness. He’s not the Messiah—he makes that clear to all. He’s only baptizing with water—he has no power in himself. But the One who comes after him, well, He’s the One with power. He’ll baptize with the Holy Spirit, washing their sins away and giving them faith.

That’s something to look forward to: John’s just the opening act, and the One with the power is coming. If John’s got this much gravitas to draw the crowds, what will it be like when the Messiah shows up? Surely He’ll stand apart. You can just see Him standing there, mighty and untouchable—so close, but somehow a world apart.

In those days, Jesus comes from Nazareth of Galilee. The Messiah—God become man—is onsite where John has prepared the way. He draws near—but what happens next is so bizarre that, as Matthew tells us in his Gospel, even John the Baptist is troubled by it: Jesus comes to be baptized.

That just doesn’t make sense: He’s the Messiah, the Son of God, the One who comes with the power to baptize with the Holy Spirit. You’d expect Him to address the crowd and say, “Now that you’ve demonstrated your repentance by baptism and confession, I’m here to lead you. Follow Me. Do what I do. *Do your best to be like Me.*” Instead, Jesus does His best to be like them. He’s already become flesh, just like them, and that’s pretty striking. Now He comes to be baptized, and that’s just...well, demeaning. Baptism is for sinners, not for the Son of God. It’s not the sort of thing that the sinless Messiah should do. Imagine Jesus appearing and saying, “I am here to be your Savior: but first I have to finish treatment for My pornography and drug addictions, as well as My community service for the domestic violence charges.” It sounds wrong even to say, doesn’t it? That’s how it strikes John and the crowd: the Messiah comes to save sinners, and the first thing He says is, “I need to be baptized.” You don’t get baptized if you don’t have to—baptism is an admission of how sinful you are, how much you need God’s grace.

When Jesus comes to be baptized, John tries to stop it, but Jesus persists. Does this mean that God’s plan for salvation has already gone off the rails, that the Messiah has gone rogue against the Father? Not at all: as Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens open. The Holy Spirit descends on Him like a dove, and the Father declares from heaven, “You are My beloved Son, with You I am well pleased.”

What is going on? It’s strange enough that God was born to Mary in the first place—but now He’s born again? What’s with this Messiah? Does He need to come clean and get some things off His chest before He can be the Savior? Is He some sort of flawed hero who will do His best to save despite His own sins and weaknesses?

Not at all. Behold this miracle of Jesus’ baptism: this is how close Jesus gets to sinners. He’s baptized just like them, because He’s becoming one of them. He’s holy and sinless, but He’s taking their place. He’s not guilty of the lust or the addiction or the domestic violence, but He’s going to take those sins upon Himself. He’s going to bear them to the cross. He’s going to suffer God’s judgment for all of their sins, so that God will pardon them and give them eternal life.

That’s how close the Messiah comes. He doesn’t come to say, “I’m here to whip you into shape and make you better than you were so that you suffer less for your sin.” He comes to say, “I’m taking your place. I’ll be the Sinner so that you can be the saint. God will damn Me so that He might save you.” He says, “We’re in this together: I’ll take your sin and I’ll give you My righteousness: as long as you’re with Me, your sins are gone and you’re holy before God.” It’s as if, when all the people were baptized,

the filth of their sins was washed off of them; and when Jesus was baptized, all of their sin was washed onto Him; and finally, at the cross, the Father looked at the Son and said, "Obviously, You're the One who's been getting into trouble, and now there's hell to pay."

The Messiah draws near to sinners. How near? He takes their place. He becomes the sinner so that they can be forgiven.

II. What This Means for You

What does this mean for you? This is why you treasure your baptism so highly. This is about your salvation. It's also about your life as a Christian.

First, remember Jesus' baptism. It was for you, too. Jesus said, "I'll be the Sinner who's judged instead of you," and so He was baptized to bear all of your sins to the cross, and to suffer in your place. He's done so for all people, so that He might give forgiveness, faith and salvation to all who believe.

How do you know that He's given forgiveness, faith and salvation to you? That's where your baptism comes in. Hear again a few verses from our epistle, Romans 6:3-4: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

When you were baptized, Jesus joined you to His death and resurrection. He tells you that you've already died to sin, because He died for your sin on the cross and gives you the credit for it. He tells you that you've already been raised with Him, because He gives you life. Your body must still face death, but you already have eternal life. At your baptism, Jesus joined you to Himself. He added you—the branch—to Him, the Vine. He adopted you as His own and said, "You're in My family now. We're in this together. As long as you have Me, your sins are gone and you're holy before God."

Jesus has joined you to Him. You're in this together with Him. It's no coincidence that when Jesus commanded baptism in Matthew 28, He also promised, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." You can be sure that forgiveness and salvation are yours because Jesus gave them to you in your baptism, and He continues to give them to you in His Word and Supper.

That's common knowledge among us, I hope. It defines what it means to live as a Christian. To live as a Christian is to live in your baptism. To live in your baptism is to be in this together with Christ. It's to live a life of ongoing repentance and confession: that doesn't sound glamorous, but it's important. See, Jesus remains the holy Son of God, risen from the dead: He cannot abide with sin. If you do not live a life of repentance, but instead hold onto sin or just don't care about being forgiven, then you're saying to Jesus, "I'd like you to step away for a bit. I don't want to be in this together with You." That leads to hard hearts and unbelief. That's why you live in your baptism with a life of repentance. You constantly affirm the truth and confess your sins, that you need Jesus and His grace. It's also why you make it a point to hear the Word, because the Word made flesh comes to you there. It's why you avail yourself of the Supper often, because you can't be in this together much more than when Jesus gives you His body and blood. It's why, if you're especially troubled by some sin, you even make use of private confession and absolution so that you might hear from your Savior in His Word that not even that sin can separate you from Him.

The Christian life is all about remaining in Christ, for Christ declares that He is in this together with you.

If that seems dull to you, please understand how terribly important it is to make this plain. Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ get this wrong. In many churches, it's taught that baptism is a historical event in the past—a starting point at best, and now the Christian life is all about you making

yourself better, you conquering bad habits, you overcoming your sin because of what Jesus has done for you in the past. The message seems to be, "Jesus came before the past and He is coming again in the future: the Christian life is all about you preparing yourself for when you're with Him." How pervasive is this teaching in our land? Go to a Christian bookstore, and see how many shelves are filled with Christians "self-help" books—and then go and see how many shelves are devoted to Jesus with you in the means of grace. This is one of the reasons why we have such a difficult time seeing the Christian life as remaining with Christ, because it's so often portrayed as trying to get to Him.

No, living as a Christian is to live with Christ now. To live with Christ is to be with Jesus where He comes to you, so that He might be in this together with you all the days of your life. By His grace and presence, He strengthens your faith—so God grant you victory over temptation and sin by His grace. But where you fall and still struggle with sin, know that Christ is in this together with you, for He's joined you to Himself in your baptism. You remain His beloved child, in whom He is well pleased—not because you've made yourself better, but because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen