

The Baptism of the Lord Mark 1 4 to 11

(This grew from a sermon of my mum that she emailed to me)

Why was Jesus baptized? John the Baptist's baptism was to wash away a person's sin – a public act of turning back to God. Scripture tells us Jesus was completely without sin. He had no need to repent, to turn back to God. So why did Jesus approach John at the Jordan and allow himself to be baptized?

Perhaps you will recall that, throughout their entire history as God's people, the people of Israel would turn away from God, they would follow their own will, they would worship other gods. Amid this sinful time, a prophet would be called by God to bring God's message to these "stiff-necked" people: turn back to me, God would lovingly invite them...turn back to me from false gods and false worship. The path you are taking away from me, God warned them, the path you are taking leads to dire consequences. Some of the people would repent, some of the time, and turn back to God for a while.

But, at the beginning of Mark's gospel, these prophets were a distant memory. It had been more than 300 hundred years since a prophet had arisen in Israel...and then John arrived on the scene. John called the Jewish people to remember their relationship with God – they were God's treasured possession...if only they would repent – turn back to God – and re-enter the Promised Land through the Jordan River once more. This time, their entry was symbolic – through the baptism John offered...immersed in the muddy waters of the Jordan, the people were declaring their intention to follow God once more, cleansed from their sins. The Jewish people were excitedly flocking to this new prophet known as John the Baptist. He was doing something wonderful. But John had more interesting news – he was simply paving the way, he told them...paving the way for one greater than he was – the one to save them, the one God had promised to them...that one was about to arrive.

Into this excited buzz stepped Jesus. He was going to enter the water with John too. Purification through water rituals was not new to the Jewish people – these rites had been a part of their lives for as long as they could remember. Water cleanses. Water purifies. And so, we are totally on board with John when he holds up the

stop sign in front of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel and says, "Hey, wait a minute. You don't need this baptism. I should be getting baptized by you."

Jesus went to be baptized, not for private reasons, but as a person with a public calling. John had called all Israel to repentance and with Israel Jesus had to go. Jesus was one of them. He could not separate himself from the people, but had to be fully identified with them in their movement towards God.

But there was even more to it than that. It wasn't just an affirmation of who and what Jesus was, but had huge significance for the rest of humanity.

Jesus' baptism changed baptism.

John's baptism was one of repentance - a baptism from sin in order to turn people back to God. The thing is, I know that as a baptized person, I still have sin, I am still capable of turning away from God. Do I need to be baptized over and over again? No...there is more to baptism and it was Jesus who gave it that something more.

The baptism of Jesus does not deny our need for repentance and forgiveness – part of being baptized is a washing away of sin but we only need to do it once. Why?

When Jesus was baptized, baptism became the sign of God's new creation. We become a new creation at our baptism – it is our entry point into a new and fuller life with God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. How does this happen?

When Jesus was baptized, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove upon him. And a voice from heaven declared, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

At our baptism, we too have the spirit of God descend upon us – rest on us. We too have God tell us that we are his beloved. By our baptism, we become part of the body of Christ. Together, the Church is Christ's body here on earth.

By our baptism, we become brothers and sisters of Christ. We become sons and daughters of God. The water of baptism washes away not only our sins, the water of baptism washes away our old, sinful life. The Holy Spirit resting on us brings us into the fellowship of the Trinity – we are a part of their love together with them. We have been given a new life, clothed in the righteousness of Christ. When God looks on us, God sees our glory and perfection that we were created to have – not the sin we still have. Formed in God’s image, we now bear the image of Christ, marked as Christ’s own forever, Christ – who is the perfect image of God. God made flesh.

The ultimate display of the perfection of Christ was shown to the world on the cross. In his perfect love, Christ defeated the systemic sinfulness of the world – conquering the powers of this world because he refused to be like them. In perfect love, Jesus died. In perfect love, Jesus was raised from the dead. In the mystery of our baptism, we die to the sins of the world as we were immersed in the water and we are raised to new life with Christ as we are raised from the water. Through the mystery of baptism, we participate in the perfect love of Christ, we participate in Christ – in his death and resurrection, we can now become that perfect love in our own sinful lives.

But most of us were baptized as children and we likely weren’t told any of this when we were growing up. Even those people who maybe were baptized as adults likely didn’t know all of this. Preparation for adults to receive baptism in the early church took three years. Now you’re lucky if you have three hours with the priest before baptism. And so, we just don’t know...we don’t know the extent of the amazing gift that has been a part of our lives since parents and godparents stood around the font, smiling proudly at us. Because of Christ’s death and resurrection, because of his baptism in the Jordan River, and through the power of the Holy Spirit now resting on us, we participate in the life of God, we share in God’s love, we can become God’s perfect love. And we didn’t know.

Because we didn’t know, we sometimes feel separate from the love of God, distant from God, maybe even disconnected from God. We feel unworthy.

Because we didn't know, it becomes possible for us to turn from God...to turn to the ways of the world instead of following God's ways in the world.

But...now you know. God calls us by name. God calls us his beloved. We are God's treasured possession. God's Spirit is with us night and day and joins us – everyone who has God's Spirit resting on them through baptism – joins us to each other and to God, living life with God in God's kingdom.

Now you know. And so there is a choice before us – every day, every moment, there is a choice before us. We can live the way of the world with nobody realizing we are followers of Christ unless we tell them. Or we can live into the reality of knowing that God's Spirit rests on us through our baptism, joining us together with the God who spoke the world into existence. And let God's powerful voice resound in your life – “You are mine. You are beloved. With you I am well pleased.”