

WE ARE BAPTIZED INTO JESUS

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 6 John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

One year in high school gym class we had a unit on archery. Archery builds strength, dexterity, hand-eye coordination, patience, endurance, and a number of other things. And most of us were terrible at it in the beginning, and worked our way to being merely below average by the time the unit ended. I remember quite a few times when my classmates and I would walk down to pick up our arrows, finding them stuck into the hay bales, and flown back against the back wall of the gym, under the bleachers—just about everywhere except in the targets were aiming for. Coach Megow once kidded us for going so easy on the school budget by leaving the archery targets “so pristine and unmolested by any mark whatsoever.”

The word for “sin” here in Mark and in many places in the New Testament is a word that means “to miss the mark,” like my high school archery class. The image the word calls to mind is I suppose very similar: to try to do what God has commanded, but to fail, to miss the bullseye, miss the inner rings, and in fact to miss the target altogether. Look at the arrows littering the ground that represent our attempts to keep God’s law, and we failed.

In our Gospel Lesson, the solution to all of our errors and is announced in the most humble of ways. If you were asked to write a theme for the approach of Christ out of heaven, coming down to rescue mankind, you and I would try to compose some big, brassy, triumphal march—but that’s not what God did. God does his greatest and more awesome acts into the most humble of circumstances. We saw that a couple of weeks ago as we gathered around the manger in Bethlehem, and now, as the Savior of Mankind is coming to begin his ministry on earth—where is the triumphant parade? Where are the rows upon rows of horn players? Where are the marble steps and red carpet? There’s none of this at all.

There’s a strange man out in the desert wearing an animal skin; his most innovative, up-to-date piece of technology is, oooh, a leather belt for just the sake of modesty. He doesn’t eat like a king. He doesn’t even eat like his middle class. He eats bugs and he scoops honey out of the bees nest for a little variety. I wonder if his face and arms were covered in bee stings.

And his audience? Not much. Mark makes it sound ostentatious, but the “Judean countryside” and the population of Jerusalem is not a Minneapolis crowd. Maybe not even a New Ulm crowd. It was a couple hundred of the trampled-on stragglers of Judea. A backward little country of used-to-be people who kind of remembered Solomon in his glory days, but ten-twelfths of Solomon’s kingdom was gone forever.

So to this little mediocre group, this wild man from the wilderness announces that God is coming, coming, coming—here he comes, he’s on his way. And to prepare us, John does not command us to build a whole new temple for Christ, bigger and even more magnificent than Solomon’s, but rather, to prepare our hearts. John’s sermon is about baptism, repentance, and the forgiveness of sins.

Baptism—just a bath, any old kind of washing. The word is used apart from the sacrament in the New Testament for washing the dishes, washing your hands, even washing the furniture. It just means to apply water to get something clean. But there were Old Testament baptisms, out in the desert, where water was scarce but still required, especially when the scapegoat was taken outside the camp. The man who led the animal away couldn’t return without washing himself—showing that the sins transferred to the released animal had not rubbed off on him.

In our baptism, we have the grace of God coming to us, to clean up the whole mess of all of our sins—the tries that failed, the rebellions, the hostility, the doubts, and of course, the sin we’re born with, our original sin—all of it is washed away, sent away, in baptism.

Apart from the people—the baptizer and the one being baptized—only two things are necessary for a baptism: baptism gets its power from the word of God, and he commands us to use water. Water is the most abundant thing on the planet. Israel could find water even in the desert. There is no place on earth where you and I might want to baptize a baby that does not have access to some kind of water.

And there is no sin in our flesh, in our record, or in our memory that is not sent away forever by baptism. Jesus commands us to make disciples of all nations using two means: By baptizing, and by teaching. And Peter says that baptism and all of its blessings are “for you and for your children.” So we baptize.

We cherish our Lutheran heritage—why? Is it simply because it’s our story, our history, and therefore it’s meaningful to us? No. For one thing, it isn’t “our” story—it is for those of us with a German-Lutheran heritage, but many of our members came from different circumstances and we rejoice with a special welcoming joy over them.

Do we cherish our Lutheran heritage because of its rich musical history? The hymns, liturgies and music of Martin Luther, of Nicholas Selnecker, of Beethoven, Bach, Brahms, Handel, Carl Schalk and others? This is truly a gift to the church which has also been a blessing in a lesser sense to the world, but there is more.

We cherish our Lutheran heritage because of the restoration of the Gospel to the Church. We see this in so many ways, and I'm not sure we truly appreciate it. The Christian Church that was pretty much universal before the Lutheran Reformation taught that baptism only washed away original sin, and not the sins of a person's lifetime. This is a watering down of baptism that leaves the Christian wanting more and not knowing where to turn. The fragmented Christian Church that exploded into a hundred denominations after the Reformation doesn't consider baptism to be a means of grace, and so their baptism has no meaning for the people. But Luther understood as did the ancient church and of course all of Jesus' followers that baptism washes away, sends away, sins—all of them.

So why did Jesus need to get baptized? He had no sins to confess; not even original sin. He had no need to repent. But NEVERTHELESS Jesus came to our side, to climb into the water with us, and get washed alongside of us. And in this, Jesus reminds me of the parent who watches the toddler come in from digging in the mud of the flowerbed, filthy from head to toe, dirty fingernails, filthy hair, somehow, even mud up the nose and deep inside the ears. So what does the parent do? He gets into the tub with the toddler. Partly, that's to make sure everything gets clean. It isn't the parent who needs the bath—not at all. He'll probably take another bath later. But it's also to teach the child that this is important. This is how it's done. This is the soap, and this is the washcloth, and this is the fingernail brush, and this is the shampoo, and we use them all. The trappings are different—a boat or a dolly or a squeaky toy—but this is what the important stuff is all about. And so Jesus climbed down into the font alongside us. He lowered himself to be one of us.

And what happened next? The ripping apart of the sky. I don't know what that looked like, but it wasn't like anything else that had ever happened before, and it won't happen again before the end comes. Two things came down as Christ came up out of the water. The Father spoke: "I'm pleased with you, my beloved Son."

The Father sent the Son to suffer. He sent his Son to climb up onto the cross and to bleed and to die for us, and here he is: You've started today, my Son. Keep at it. And the Spirit descends in a form the people there will understand—like a bird, a ceremonially clean and commonplace dove, reminding us perhaps of the peace at last revealed by the discovery the dove made after the flood, but reminding us, too, of the hovering role of the Spirit in the creation, observing what was happening and showing God's care and concern for his creation.

All of this was for our sake. Our sins—all of the failed attempts and all of the other sins alongside them, were sent away by the Son of God, and washed away in our baptism. We are baptized into Christ, into his righteousness, into his forgiveness. Remember it every day—every time you wash your hands, your face, the dishes, your baby—you are washed clean, too, forever. Amen.