

FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

<sup>4</sup> John came, baptizing in the desert and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> Everyone from the country of Judea went out to him, along with all the people of Jerusalem. They confessed their sins and were baptized by him in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup> John wore clothing of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He preached, saying, "After me will come one who is more powerful than me, and I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the laces of his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."  
<sup>9</sup> At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.  
<sup>10</sup> As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased."

There are two parts to repentance. The first takes place in our hearts when we acknowledge that we have sinned. The consequences of sin grab us by the throat and hold the point of a knife to our hearts, and if we fully grasp just what sin does to our relationship with God, and feel the darkness of everlasting torment falling down on us, dimming our eyesight, filling our ears with nothing but the roar of our fearful heartbeats, and we will truly know fear. The fear of being separated forever from God's love, from light, from any comfort, from any ease to pain or suffering, from the voice or hand of any friend, any help, or even from being certain of anything. That fear, terror, is the cliff, the abyss we are looking down into, and that means that we have hopefully stopped dead in our tracks because of the knowledge that our sin has brought us to this point.

Then words come. Words on a page that are familiar, but words that maybe did not always seem so precious as they do when the fear of hell and punishment grips and stabs and binds you to your own failings, your own sins, your own guilt and shame.

But the words! The words are: "You're free. Come to me. Trust me. Your sins are forgiven, and you are my own dear child." And when they were first spoken to you, they were: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Those words cut the bonds of sin, open the prison door, release us from the grief and fear and shame and dread of sin, and bring us to the garden of God's Paradise, like a field of spring flowers in the sunshine, fresh, clean air, the songs of birds and the laughter of children and friends. Such is forgiveness!

John the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth was sent by God to baptize people. The Gospel tells us that he was “sent from God” (John 1:6) as a witness to God’s light, and to point to the one who came after him. Since he was sent from God, we know that he got the idea and the words for baptism from God as a command, but whether this was through a dream or an angel or the voice of God speaking to him, we don’t know. What we do know is what Mark tells us here: **People from all over Judea and Galilee and even from down in Jerusalem came to him confessing their sins and asking to be baptized.** He used a river for his water because the number of people made it necessary to do this outdoors.

Confession, such as we all did a few minutes ago at the beginning of the service, is when we admit to God that we have sinned. We discover this by examining our lives according to the Ten Commandments. Luther asks: “**Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, employer, or employee? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy?**” These are all questions that come from the Fourth Commandment. Then he moves to the Fifth: “**Have you hurt anyone by word or deed?** And then the Seventh: “**Have you been dishonest, careless, wasteful, or done other wrong?** Whether our hearts are pricked or stabbed, we answer “Yes,” and we remain troubled by the things that the commandments bring up like a ladle bringing up chunks in the soup.

But confession has two parts. After this first part, which we do, comes the part we don’t do, the pastor must -- **must** -- proclaim the forgiveness of your sins. Don’t doubt this, but believe. Jesus said: “**Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, but whatever you unbind on earth will be unbound in heaven.**” Our sins are forgiven before God in heaven and by God in heaven. That’s why the minister says, “By the authority of Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins.”

When John was baptizing, he wore strange clothes and ate strange food. That was so that people would know they had the right man. He was identified by God for the crowds, looking a lot like the Old Testament prophets had looked. Not all the same, mind you, but all strange and recognizable. Some with simple clothes, or strange food, or stinking of whale, but all, all, with the bold brassy, clear trumpet call of God’s holy Word.

John told a special kind of riddle about Jesus. He said, “**After me will come one more powerful than me.**” That didn’t sit right in the ears of his hearers. We don’t mind admitting that an older person is smarter or wiser than we are. Oh, some think that they’re smarter than everyone. But John’s word fight against them, too. John is saying that someone after me, younger me, is greater than me. He is so much greater that I’m not worthy to get down and untie his shoelaces like a servant at the end of the day.

This is the mystery of Jesus Christ our Lord. In his time, he wasn't respected or acknowledged. But what happened when he himself came to be baptized? He went down to the river just like everybody else. But he went with no sins to confess. He came with no sins at all, but picked up all our sins without leaving any behind. He did not need to be baptized, but he wanted to be baptized, as he said, **“to fulfill all righteousness,”** so that you and I would know that we are baptized into Jesus, in his name, under the umbrella of his grace. **“So baptism was instituted by God primarily for Christ’s sake and then afterward for the sake of all mankind. For first Jesus sanctified baptism through his own body so that he would take away all sin, so that afterwards those who believe in him can have the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>a</sup>**

So John baptized Jesus. Jesus commanded that we baptize in the name of the Triune God. Did John do that? What were his words? What was his formula? We don't know. But we are told that the Triune God was there. So the declaration we make and are baptized under, the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, was not only implied in the Baptism of Jesus, but appeared to everyone who was there and to us, who read about here in the beginning of the Gospel. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit were there in person.

Heaven was **torn open**, Does that mean that the clouds parted, or the fabric of the firmament was torn the way that the fabric of the temple curtain was torn apart at his death? It was not merely as if the blue sky suddenly gave way to a patch of starry outer space beyond, but that all of it, puffy cloud, bright blue and starry black, all gave way so that the bright eternal glory of heaven was revealed, so that the divine voice of the Father would not be mistaken for anybody else. The Father spoke: “This is my Son.” The Son stood receiving this praise from his Father. And the Spirit descended like a dove, **“not as though Jesus had been without the Spirit before this, since all the fulness of God already dwelt within him, but because it was prophesied that the Messiah would be anointed with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>b</sup>** This prophecy is from Psalm 45 and from Isaiah 61.

Remember your baptism, even though you probably don't remember it. Thank God that you were washed in Jesus' name in the baptism Jesus was baptized with. You are connected to Jesus. He is your brother, not by blood, but by baptism. The sinless one picked up all your sins and washed them all away. The holy one gave you his holiness. Remember that as you live. Remember that as you love your loved ones.

There is no sin that is not covered by Jesus in your baptism. Amen.

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<sup>a</sup> Luther, 1540 sermon “At the Baptism of Bernhard Von Anhalt.” LW 51:318

<sup>b</sup> Martin Chemnitz, quoted in Ylvisaker's commentary on the Gospels, p. 117.