

Mark 1:4-11

The Baptism of Our Lord + Epiphany 1 + January 7, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The Beloved

The Word of the Lord from Mark 1:11: "You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased." This is the Word of the Lord.

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

This is how Jesus' public ministry begins. In fact, in the Gospel of Mark, this is His first appearance. There's no record of Christmas in Mark, or any childhood story. Instead, you get John the Baptist in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. Then, in verse 9, *boom*: Jesus appears and begins to make Himself known.

And on this first day of His public ministry, He doesn't grab the mic, tell John to take a seat and then preach a sermon outlining His goals. Instead, He gets in line with the sinners, and He gets baptized by John. You could probably tell me what happens next from memory: as He comes out of the water, the heavens open, the Spirit descends on Him like a dove, and the Father declares from heaven, "You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased."

"You are My beloved Son," says God the Father. It's a marvelous declaration, and part of the great joy is that God the Father declares that this ordinary-looking man is not so ordinary after all. If you're looking for someone to confirm that Jesus is truly the only-begotten Son of God made flesh, I'd say that you can't do much better than God the Father saying so from heaven.

But there's more to this declaration: who else does God call His "son" in Scripture? This is what He also calls His people, Israel. For instance, when He sends Moses to Egypt to speak to Pharaoh, He says, "You shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is My firstborn son'" (Ex 4:22); and likewise in Hosea 11:1, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." In our Gospel lesson, "all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem" have gathered; so we can say that God's "son" Israel is there, and we can say God's only-begotten Son Jesus is there.

And why is Jesus there, getting baptized with all of those sinners? He doesn't need forgiveness: He's holy and sinless. With all those sins getting washed off of all those sinners, the most likely thing to happen to Him is that He'll get contaminated with their dirt.

That is exactly why Jesus is baptized. While their sins are getting washed off of them in their baptism, He's soaking them up in His. He's numbering Himself with the transgressors. He's taking His place with them so that He can take their place at Calvary. The wages of sin is death, and so He is going to die on behalf of God's people.

So when God the Father declares, "You are My beloved Son," it's not *just* that He says to Jesus, "You're My only-begotten Son in the flesh." He's also saying, "You are now Israel. You're going to live a holy, sinless life to make up for all of their sins. And then, on the cross, you're going to suffer for all of their sins so that they might be forgiven."

Then He adds, "With you I am well pleased."

That's how Jesus' public ministry begins, pointing to how it will end. As soon as He's baptized, He's on His way to the cross on behalf of all those sinners.

Don't miss what else happens when Jesus is baptized: the heavens open. Mark says that they're *torn* open. This isn't like a little trapdoor opening so that the Holy Spirit can appear like a dove before it snaps shut again. This is like taking a garment and ripping it in half so that it's beyond repair. The fact that Jesus is baptized for sinners means that the cross is going to happen. Heaven is open for all who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus, and that isn't going to change.

In fact, one more tidbit for you: only one other thing gets torn like this in the Gospel of Mark. It's the temple curtain when Jesus dies, torn in two from top to bottom. According to the historian Josephus, that curtain was embroidered with heavenly features – constellations and the like (though *not* the zodiac). Thus when Jesus dies and the curtain is torn in two, heaven is symbolically torn open once again. It's one more little proclamation that what begins with Jesus' baptism culminates at the cross: the Son of God opens heaven for sinners.

We should note too that the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove – actually *into* Jesus, says the Greek. John just finished saying that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit, and the Lord has just demonstrated that Jesus has the Spirit to baptize with.

That's how Jesus' ministry begins – with His baptism, with Father, Son and Holy Spirit at work for your salvation ... and well pleased to do so.

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So let us speak of your salvation; and let's add one little reminder before we get to you, specifically. Remember that the Israel of God, the people of God, means all those who believe in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile. When the Lord speaks through the prophet Joel about our days, He doesn't say, "I will pour out my Spirit on the Jews alone." He says, "I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh."

Thus in our text, when God declares that Jesus is now His son Israel, you're included. Jesus is baptized for you. Though it defies our sense of time, we can say it this way: in your baptism, all of your sins are washed off of you. In Jesus' baptism, all of your sins were washed onto Him: and because He soaks them up and bears them to the cross, you are forgiven. Heaven is open for you.

Let's be bolder in our joy. If God declares that Jesus is taking the place of His people at His baptism, then God declares that Jesus is taking the place of you, personally.

We need to pick on a sinner personally, so let's pick on me. In my case as one baptized, at the Jordan the Father declares to Jesus, "My only-begotten Son, You are now Timothy John." I'll be honest with you: my collection of sins is a rather mundane bunch that would never be grist for a Netflix series. But they are my sins, more than enough to condemn me. They're more than enough to keep front and center that I'm sinful flesh and blood, and that left to myself I'm well on my way to death and hell.

But there at the Jordan River, Jesus numbers Himself with sinners – with all sinners, which would include a certain pastor who was baptized as Timothy John. Take a moment, and plug your name into the Father's announcement, so that the Father says to Jesus, "You are now _____," and fill in the blank with your name. Jesus is taking your place. He's already bearing all your sins, including the ones that you don't want Him to know about. They're washed onto Him. He steps up out of the Jordan afflicted with everything that's wrong about you. He doesn't deserve that any more than you deserve His grace.

And what does the Father say about this? He says He's well pleased. He's well pleased because Jesus has become flesh to be your Savior, and He saves you by bearing your sins to the cross. Every day on the way to Calvary as He lives a perfect life, He's doing it on behalf of a sinner named Timothy John. Every day, He lives sinlessly for you: every time you read or hear the Gospels read, keep in mind that whatever Jesus is doing, He's doing it for you, personally. He keeps adding to His burden: He heals the

blind and the leprous and lame, takes their afflictions upon Himself, because He's come to live and die for them too.

He trudges to the cross with all that garbage; and since He's taken my place and lived His life for me, He now takes my place and dies His death for me. The Father looks at Him and sees all of my sin and sinfulness, all that's wrong with my body and all that will ever be wrong with me. He finds His Son unholy with my sin, afflicted with all my mess, and so He forsakes His Son for me. At Calvary, He finds His Son unholy with your sin, and so He forsakes His Son for you.

On the third day, He rises again! And before He ascends into heaven, He sends the apostles to make disciples – how? By baptizing.

See, I know that Jesus took my place in the Jordan, and I know that He lived for me and bore my sins and died for me – for *me*, personally – because He said so to me, personally. I have witnesses! They signed a certificate that says that through a pastor fifty years ago, the Lord said, "Timothy John, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In saying that, He said, "Timothy John, I hereby clothe you with My own righteousness; because every moment I lived between My conception and My ascension, I lived it without sin to be righteous for you. I hereby join you to My death for your sin so that you don't have to suffer that condemnation; and I hereby join you to My resurrection so that you will be raised and live forever too."

In baptism, the Lord has said the same to you. By name. He lived, died and rose for you. You know it because He said, "I baptize you."

And you know what God the Father says to you and Timothy John now? He says, "You are My beloved child. I am well pleased with you." He says this because you are baptized into Christ, His beloved Son, who numbered Himself with you in the Jordan.

Somewhere in a sermon, I'm supposed to call you to repentance for some sin that is found in the text. The big one for today looks so benign: it's quite likely that you simply don't appreciate how great a gift your baptism is. And if you don't appreciate the value of something, you end up treating it carelessly, and then you end up not caring if it's lost. Gifts *can* be mistreated and eventually lost: so, for instance, it's one thing to say, "Once upon a time, someone gave me a diamond ring." That is not the same as saying, "I still have that ring today." The ring is no good to you if it's lost.

That's why, as Luther says, it's perfectly accurate to say, "I was baptized;" but it's far better to say, "I *am* baptized."

To *be* baptized is such a blessed thing! It is a great thing to begin your day by making the sign of the cross and remembering your baptism by saying, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In your baptism, the Lord declares that the Son stood in for you at His baptism, at His cross and at His resurrection. In your baptism, the Lord poured out His Holy Spirit upon you (Acts 2:38). In your baptism, the Father said, "My child, I love you and I am well pleased with you." In your baptism, the Lord declared that the heavens remain open specifically for you.

When you're tempted by some sin and you fear it's getting the best of you, remember: you're baptized. You're not a slave to sin anymore, and the Holy Spirit promises you grace and strength to stand and resist.

When you've fallen into some sin, remember that you're baptized. That sin means that, at least for the moment, you've forgotten who you are – a holy, beloved child of God set free from sin. But it also means that Christ has died for your sins, and so you know that He delights in your repentance, and rejoices to forgive you.

When you're wondering if God still loves and forgives you, remember: you're baptized! You've got God's promise that He loves and forgives you for Jesus' sake, and His promise is far more trustworthy than your doubts and feelings.

When you're dogged by sickness, affliction, worry or grief, remember: you're baptized! The devil will use these things to wear you down and make you wonder if you're really a believer. But you know that Christ bore these afflictions to the cross. On this side of the grave, He felt them, and so you will too. But He has joined you to His death and to His resurrection, so He will raise you up too; and in the meantime, He gives you this baptismal promise that, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

You're baptized! You already have eternal life, because Christ stood in for you so that He might join you to Himself. It's a gift; and remember, gifts can be lost. Many believe that baptism is some sort of magic guarantee, that they can fall away from the faith and church, and still be assured of heaven. That's the corrupted logic of the sinful nature. Don't cheat yourself and throw away what God has given. Live each day as one baptized: confident of God's love, of Christ's life, death and resurrection for you; confident that the Holy Spirit dwells within you with every good gift. It's there that you will find grace, confidence and joy as a child of God, because God the Father declares of you, "You are My beloved child, in whom I am well pleased" ... because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

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