

January 10, 2021
Mark 1:4-11

Baptism of Our Lord
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Why Does Baptism Matter?”

“And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

As the internet has become a necessary tool during the COVID-19 pandemic, so has the need for keeping our identity secure at a time when cybersecurity and internet hacking is becoming a major issue. It’s not only our personal computers and tablets that are subject to such crimes; recently, the US government discovered that a foreign entity has hacked into many of its most important agencies, and the potential damage has not fully been discovered.

As a means of protection against such identity theft, the need for user ID numbers and passwords has become more important; we are often asked to make our passwords more secure so that they will not be as susceptible to being discovered by nefarious online forces. While all of us can recognize the importance of such strong safeguards, trying to remember which ID number and password we have used on certain accounts can be aggravating, especially with all the websites we find ourselves visiting during the current provincial lockdown. But even if it is a source of frustration, establishing one’s identity is important in an age where our lives can be thrown into turmoil if our most important means of identification are stolen.

There are many ways in which we can verify our identity beyond what we need to log onto a website. Our identity can be affirmed through fingerprints or a DNA sample; facial recognition software is increasing used to confirm who we are (the reason why smiling is no longer permitted on drivers’ licenses!). We are often required to produce birth certificates or passports to confirm our citizenship, and most of us carry around numerous forms of identification daily in case we need to prove that we truly are who we claim to be. In a world where many people seek to masquerade as someone else for illegitimate gain, establishing our identity is an important safeguard for our security and peace of mind.

But how do we establish our identity as people of God? How will others know that we are Christians?

There are many ways to prove that we are Christians. We can point to membership in a Christian congregation, or produce a Confirmation certificate, or recite the Creeds or other statements of faith. We can quote Bible verses that have special meaning to us, or speak of our involvement in worship, learning, and service ministries. But for Christians, our primary means of identification is **baptism**, the sacrament through which by water and the Word we are “*reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ*” (ELW Holy Baptism). It is through our being baptized that we are claimed as children of God and are born anew to a living hope which is ours in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is through the gift of baptism that God “*has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you*” (1 Peter 1:3-4).

When we are baptized *“we are now said to be ‘united with him’ and, as it were, baked into one loaf, and we receive into ourselves the power of both is death and resurrection, and also the fruit or consequence of it is found in us, since we have been baptized in him.”* (Martin Luther, 1535).

We are called to remember and give thanks for the gift of baptism and what it means for our identity as children of God on this day when we remember the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ by John the Baptist. John is introduced as one who *“appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* (Mark 1:4), identified in other gospels as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s promise of the voice that cries out *“in the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God”* (Isaiah 40:3). His appearance and diet are signs that he is a holy man, but he also clearly differentiates his mission from the one whose way he is preparing: *“He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light”* (John 1:7-8). His baptismal ministry is accompanied by his proclamation that *“the one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”* (1:7-8).

- *“Dressed in animal hair with a piece of tanned hide around his waist, his breath heavy with locusts and wild honey, John proclaimed that Someone was coming, someone so spectacular that it was not enough simply to hang around waiting for him to arrive. It was time to get ready, to prepare the way, so that when he came he could walk a straight path right to their doors.”* – Barbara Brown Taylor.

The one whose coming John the Baptist proclaimed makes his appearance when *“in those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan”* (1:9). Mark’s account lacks the objection of John the Baptist reported in Matthew: *“John would have prevented him, saying, I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’”* (Matthew 3:14-15). Mark’s focus is on what happens after Jesus is baptized and how he is identified as one who is not only distinct from John but also unique among all persons. While John’s baptism was a rite of *“repentance for the forgiveness of sins,”* for the one who *“in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin”* (Hebrews 4:15) the baptism of Jesus establishes his identity which will become central in the Gospel account of his life, death, and resurrection. The focus of the Baptism of Our Lord is on what happens *“just as he was coming out of the water, [when] he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”* (1:10-11).

Jesus’ unique status as the Son of God is confirmed by the descent of the Holy Spirit. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is the only one who sees the heavens open and the Spirit descend (in Matthew the heavenly voice proclaims that *“this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”* – Matthew 3:17), and only he hears the divine voice. *“Mark’s readers are shown the identity of Jesus, while that knowledge remains hidden from characters in the narrative.”* (PHEME PERKINS).

The descent of the Spirit shows that Jesus is the suffering servant of God who was to bring salvation to the nations (*“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”* – Isaiah 42:1). God’s Word confirms Jesus’ status as the unique source of salvation for humanity. The title “Son of God” has

its origins in Hebrew Scriptures, as does the prophecy of God's gift of the Spirit to the one who will bring salvation:

- "I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you.'" – Psalm 2:7.
- "Thus says the LORD who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you: 'Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen'" – Isaiah 44:2.
- "Then they remembered the days of old, of Moses his servant. Where is the one who put within them his holy spirit, who caused his glorious arm to march at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name, who led them through the depths?" – Isaiah 63:11-13.

Elements of apocalyptic symbolism – the open heavens, the descent of the Spirit, and the divine voice – also call attention to the fact that Jesus is the agent of God's salvation, the one who is indeed greater than John. His is the one with whom God is "well-pleased," who will play the key role in the coming of salvation, who will baptize his followers with the gift of the Holy Spirit: "*the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD*" (Isaiah 11:2).

- "The basic significance of the baptism passage is still its witness to the identity of Jesus ... the entire story which will follow is above all the story of Jesus and what God did through him. This is why the baptism of Jesus matters. As a secret epiphany, it tells the reader the true identity of Jesus." – Lamar Williamson Jr.

It is important for Mark's readers to know the true identity of Jesus so that they might have a better understanding of our Lord as he is presented in this Gospel. As one who preaches, teaches, heals the sick, raises the dead, and feeds the multitudes, they can understand how this man from Nazareth is the fulfillment of God's promises of the one who comes to be Lord and Saviour of all. In his suffering and death, they bear witness to the "*Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29), and in his resurrection they can rejoice in the good news that "*because I live, you will live also*" (John 14:19). The identity of Jesus that is confirmed at his baptism is the basis for our confession of faith that "*I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord*" (Apostles Creed). As the baptism of Jesus matters in his identification as the Son of God and the Saviour of all humanity, so does baptism matter for us as we live and serve as the Church which is the Body of Christ. In Paul's letters, the baptism of believers establishes our identity as Christians:

- "... in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." – Galatians 3:26-29.
- "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of God, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” – Romans 6:3-5.

Baptism matters because it is through his Holy Sacrament that we gain our true identity, that inheritance that can never be taken away from us: by water and the Holy Word we are reborn as children of God, as heirs of all of God’s promises for God’s people. In Holy Baptism, we know that we are “*God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved*” (Colossians 3:12) and that no matter what challenges or obstacles we may face we live in the holy and certain hope that “*neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever*” (ELW Hymn 781). Baptism matters because it is the identity that no one can deny us, no one can steal from us, no one can seek to erase or strip away. It is an identity that is truly “*imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you*” (1 Peter 1:4) the God-given identity that assures us that “*neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:38-39).

- “In Jesus’ baptism, the Holy Spirit has the central role. It is the Spirit rather than washing that affects the transformation of the baptized. The Spirit creates a profound change in us because, at least in most Christian traditions, we receive faith that does not result from our fulfilling John’s requirement to repent. We baptize infants who have no words of repentance.” – Melinda Quivik.

As a child who grew up attending worship and Sunday school every week, I knew that I had been baptized; I knew that it was in my home congregation, that I was baptized by the pastor who had served our congregation for thirty-seven years, and that my godparents were my Aunt Alice and Uncle Norman. But I did not know the date of my baptism until I was applying to seminary and the date was required on the application. I quickly made a phone call home, and after some searching my parents found my baptismal certificate that was given on the date of my baptism: April 28, 1957. I soon came to understand this date as one that was a milestone in my life; as my birthday marks the beginning of my life as a person, my baptismal birthday marks the beginning of my life as a Christian, as a child of God who was claimed as God’s own through this holy sacrament, this means of grace. It is a date I mark every year with thanks because it reminds me of who I am and why baptism matters: that God has called me by name and made me God’s own child, and nothing can take that away from me or from anyone who through baptism has been “*sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever.*”

- “Baptism is the gospel in miniature, portrayed, lived out, enacted. And the gospel is promise. And promise, in biblical language, is not merely an offer of a gift on the part of God but the very gift itself imparted with that offer. The faith that receives, is nourished by, and relates to baptism clings to the promise which centers in the reality of the forgiveness of sins. This reality produces the only kind of joy that the Christian needs to seek or should seek.” – Martin Marty.

Martin Luther understand the importance of baptism in his life, why it mattered that he had been reborn as a child of God and marked with the cross of Christ. He proclaimed that “*there is on earth no greater comfort than baptism*” and proved his in his personal life and experience. Luther

admitted that when he was in distress or anxiety, he would comfort himself by repeating that *“I am baptized.”* This same foundation of hope gave Dietrich Bonhoeffer the courage to endure that torments of imprisonment by the Nazis for his faith; at a time when all means of identification had been taken away from him, he had the sure and certain hope that *“whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.”* At a time when so much has been taken from us, when many of the touchstones of our lives have disappeared, when we are often uncertain as to who we are or what the future holds for us, we can live in the confidence that because we have been baptized in the name of Christ Jesus, we abide every day in the confidence that we have been bound in *“the strong name of the Trinity by invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three”*:

- “Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me. Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.” – ELW Hymn 450.

Whenever I find myself grumbling over a forgotten password or other frustrations that the internet presents, I try to remember that these requests for identification matter in a world where the computer has become a vital lifeline. As my online identity matters, so does my identity as a baptized child of God matter in how I understand myself as one who is chosen and precious in the eyes of God, one from whom nothing and no one can take away God’s loving presence from my life. Even as we enter a year that offers us a lot of uncertainty and anxiety, baptism matters because it offers us the hope that assures us that *“the steadfast love of the LORD endures forever, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”* (Lamentations 3:22-24). Baptism matters because it reminds us that *we* matter, that we are the apple of God’s eye, and that we need never fear because we are God’s children, heirs of the blessed hope that is rooted in the one baptized by John, God’s beloved Son, with whom God is well-pleased.

Amen.