

January 7, 2024  
Mark 1:4-11

Baptism of Our Lord  
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## **“Does Baptism Matter?”**

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

After several years of prayer, discernment, and conversations with trusted pastors and mentors, I finally decided that it was time to apply to seminary and begin the candidacy process for ordination in the Lutheran Church in America. I had visited several seminaries and decided that I would apply to the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia; so, one day, I sat down and began to fill out the application form for admission to LTSP. Like most admission forms, this one was several pages long and also required such items as university transcripts and recommendations from professors, my home pastor, and others who could attest to my fitness to study for public ministry in the church. All was going well as I completed the basic biographical data on the form, until I got to one question that stumped me: the date of my baptism. I knew that I had been baptized at my home church in North Plainfield, NJ, and that my godparents were my Aunt Alice and Uncle Norman; I had even seen photos taken the day of my baptism. But I had no idea of the actual date when I was baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ; so, since I was away at university, I called home and asked my parents if they remembered the date that I was baptized. Of course, they did not remember the actual date either, but knew that my baptism certificate was upstairs in the file cabinet. While my father went to retrieve the certificate, my mother asked me, “Why do they want to know the date of your baptism? Does it matter if you know the exact date, as long as you know that you were baptized?”

When my father got back on the phone, he informed me that I was baptized on April 28, 1957; so, I thanked my parents, put the date on the application form, and continued with the other required questions and essays. But my mother’s question continued to ring in my ears: Does it matter if we know the date of our baptism? For that matter, does baptism matter in our lives as Christians, as children of God? Why do we place such a high priority on baptism, to the point where my application would not have been complete unless I gave the seminary the date when I was baptized into the Christian church, the Body of Christ? It is a question that I would be asked a few years after I applied to seminary (and was, of course, accepted) when Susan and I became engaged and decided to get married in the church where she was singing in the choir, the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in Philadelphia. When we met with

the parish priest, one of the first questions he asked was when we were baptized. Since I remembered the date my parents gave to me, I was able to easily answer it; for Susan, it was also a date she remembered, since she was raised in the Baptist church and was baptized when she was 14 years old. Because the Episcopal Church considers marriage to be a sacrament, it was necessary for us to be baptized so that we might be married at St. Martin's on January 7, 1984 – 40 years ago today!

As Susan and I celebrate this milestone anniversary today (although we will have a more festive celebration later this year after she has fully recovered from her surgery), the church celebrates a baptism that is a central part of the Gospel story: the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus' baptism is considered such an important event in his life and ministry that it is mentioned in the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). While the Gospel of John does not include an account of the actual baptism, John the Baptist plays a key role in the fulfillment of the prophetic message of the coming of the Messiah and pointing others to Jesus:

- “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 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 1:6-8.
- “The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard this, and they followed Jesus.” – John 1:35-37.

In Mark's Gospel, the baptism of Jesus is the first time our Lord appears in this Gospel, which includes no account of his infancy narrative or childhood. When “John the baptizer” appears in Mark, his summons to a baptism of repentance is described as a preparation for the coming of the Lord:

- “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” – Mark 1:4-5.

The desire for repentance, forgiveness, and purification was motivated by John's warning that the day of the Lord – the day of judgment – was drawing near (“*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*” – Matthew 3:2). The repentance and anticipation evoked by John's preaching provided a receptive audience for Jesus' ministry; the crowd who come to be “gathered together by baptism” are “*the remnant, the redeemed who will experience God's coming as a day of salvation*” (Pheme Perkins). Mark sees John as a forerunner of Jesus. Consequently, John's

baptism cannot be an end in itself. John's saying points away from his actions to the coming of a "greater one" and further cleansing:

- "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 Spirit." – 1:7-8.

Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit suggests a permanent change in the individual's relationship with God that begins in baptism and is brought to completion when "*I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also*" (John 14:3).

Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus begins with his simple statement that "*in those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*" (1:9). There is no report of any exchange of words between John and Jesus, as Matthew reports in his Gospel:

- "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 also omits the details that Luke provides about the familiar relationship between John and Jesus, included in his account of the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary: "*And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.*" (Luke 1:36). Mark leaves the reader to fill in the details of the scene for themselves, especially what it must have been like on that day when Jesus gets in line with the other people of Israel who come to John for repentance and forgiveness of their sins:

- "The place was teeming with sinners – faulty, sorry, guilty human beings – who hoped against hope that John could clean them up and turn their lives around. If you have ever read the arrest record in the newspaper, then you know the kinds of things most of them were guilty of – drunk driving, bad checks, petty larceny, assault. Some were notorious sinners, and some were there for crimes of the heart known only to themselves, but none of them had illusions of their own innocence. They had come to be cleaned. They knew they were not clean." – Barbara Brown Taylor.

Even though Jesus had no need for such cleansing of sin ("*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of*

God” – 2 Corinthians 5:21), he gets in line with the other sinners and is baptized in the same waters as those who came to be washed of their sinfulness so that the words of the psalmist might be fulfilled: *“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me”* (Psalm 51:10). The fact that Jesus was baptized by John *“suggests that Jesus associated himself with the need to gather the elect and to prepare for the Lord’s coming with a gesture of repentance”* (Perkins).

While Mark’s account of the actual baptism is brief, it is what happens after Jesus is baptized that is emphasized:

- “And just as he was coming up out of the water, 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 this Holy Spirit, which shows that Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering servant of God who is 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” derives from two sources in the Old Testament:

- “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 ...” – Isaiah 44:2.

In Mark, the baptism of Jesus establishes the identity and authority of the story’s central character, Jesus of Nazareth. The descent of the dove shows that Jesus is one greater than John. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus will baptize his followers with the Spirit. The voice from heaven attests that Jesus is the Son of God. The theologian Karl Barth proposed that God’s claiming Jesus in this story summarizes the essence of the Gospel: *“The astonishing claim that God does not will to remain hidden in the heights of heaven but descends to the depths of early life in order to be seen and heard by his finite creatures.”* (*Church Dogmatics*). Jesus is baptized *“to manifest both to heaven and to earth that he, Jesus Christ, is the means by which God will accomplish his will and work on earth.”* (Peter Gomes).

The fact that the baptism of Jesus is reported explicitly in three Gospel and implicitly in the fourth witnesses to the fact that the baptism of our Lord does matter in the

story of Jesus' life and ministry, and is critical in our understanding of who it is who teaches, preaches, and heals throughout the Gospels. It is the witness of the Gospel that Jesus is more than a wise teacher or gifted prophet; he is identified by the voice from heaven as the Son of God, the one with whom God is well-pleased. It is this witness that will be repeated at the Transfiguration, when the heavenly voice states to the disciples who have accompanied Jesus up the mountain that "*this is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!*" (9:7); it is also heard at the death of Jesus "*when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son.'*" (15:39). The identity established at Jesus' baptism is a part of our confession of faith in "*Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord*" (Apostles Creed).

- "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules in eternity. This is most certainly true." – Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

In his baptism by John in the Jordan River, Jesus identifies with the sinful human beings with whom he shares those waters. In his ministry that follows, Jesus teaches what it means to be a child of God, a person born anew to a living hope in the coming kingdom of God. In his death and resurrection, Jesus destroys the power of death to separate us from the love of God, rising from the tomb so that death does not claim the final victory over those who are children of God. The ministry of Jesus that begins with his baptism concludes when our Risen Lord commissions his followers to "*go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you*" (Matthew 28:19-20). This command of our Lord, along with the earthly element of water and the word of promise that accompanies it, is what makes Holy Baptism a Sacrament in the Lutheran tradition, a means of grace through which we are "*reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.*" (ELW Holy Baptism). Baptism matters for us as Lutheran Christians because it is the moment when our relationship with God begins, when God claims us as God's beloved children and bestows upon us the blessings that a loving parent bestows upon their children, including the assurance that in

baptism we receive the blessings that Christ makes possible through the fulfillment of God's Will in his death and resurrection:

- “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 the Father, 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 central to our identity as children of God; as all of God's promises are trustworthy and true, rooted in the “*steadfast love of God that never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness*” (Lamentations 3:22-23), baptism assures us that nothing – not even death – will separate us from God's love that is ours in Jesus Christ. As a sacrament, baptism is God's free gift, in which God chooses and blesses us with a love that will not let us go, a love that endures unto eternal life.

- “Thus he binds and knits together Christ's death and resurrection and our baptism, in order that baptism should not be thought of as a mere sign, but that the power of both Christ's death and resurrection is contained in it. For our sin is slain through his death – taken away, in order that it may no longer live in us but die and be dead forever ... Thus we are not said to be ‘united with him’ and, as it were, baked into one loaf, and we receive into ourselves the power of both his death and his resurrection, and also the fruit or consequence of it is found in us, since we have been baptized in him.” – Luther, 1535.

The knowledge that baptism means that we live in the steadfast, abiding presence of God in all circumstances became a tremendous source of strength for Luther; at times of deepest distress and sorrow, it is said that Luther would sit down and write three words over and over again: “*I am baptized.*” For Luther, baptism mattered because it meant that, in the words of his most famous hymn, “*though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day; the kingdom's ours forever.*” (ELW Hymn 504). Baptism matters when we gather to mourn the death of a loved one, for in the hour of sorrow we have the blessed assurance that while the one we love may be gone from our sight, the day will surely come when our Lord will gather us together into our eternal home, fulfilling the blessed hope of the beloved psalm that “*surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*” (Psalm 23).

- “Baptism is the gospel in miniature, portrayed, lived out, enacted. And the gospel is promise. And promise, in biblical language, is not merely the 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.

In my life, I have learned that baptism indeed matters – and not only when I was applying to seminary or when we were seeking to be married in the Episcopal Church. Baptism matters because it is my assurance that I am a child of God, that the blessing of our Lord Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection and the assurance of eternal life are mine, and that nothing will separate me from God’s love that is ours through our baptism into Christ. Baptism matters because it is the basis of our hope that *“neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever.”* Amen.