

+ Mark 1:4-11 + A Baptism Like No Other + Second Sunday after the Epiphany + 18 January 2009 +

It's a familiar scene. A child is messy and needs to get cleaned up. A good bath or a good washing will take care of the mess. It's happened countless times to countless infants, children, even teens and adults. Most, if not all of us have experienced it, so it's a familiar scene.

...But it's not quite what we expect. This washing doesn't clean a messy face or messy hands or even a messy body, but a messy heart. The washing doesn't take place in a tub or at a sink or even with a wash cloth, but at a font at the front of a church with a bowlful of water. The washing doesn't just leave a clean exterior until the next time a mess occurs, but cleanses the interior, changes the life and grants blessings like forgiveness and eternal life. A Baptism is a familiar scene, but a washing like no other.

This morning we celebrate a washing, **A BAPTISM LIKE NO OTHER**, as we consider Mark's brief account of Jesus' Baptism. That Baptism was like no other before or since. In turn, Christ's Baptism makes our Baptism amazing and unique as well.

The Gospel Lesson takes us to the banks of the Jordan River in the Judean wilderness outside of the city of Jerusalem. There a roughly-dressed, odd-looking man named John proclaims a message unheard in Palestine for over 400 years. ***"Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him!"*** He calls the people to repent and to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, the Christ—God's Anointed One who would come to save the world from its crushing burdens of sin and death.

Along with his message of preparation, he was ***"baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"***. Like I said, his message and his method were like none seen for centuries, so he caused quite a stir. Many people from the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside came out to hear him preach. Many listened to what he had to say and were baptized—their sins forgiven by the One whose coming John was proclaiming. It would've been easy for John to accept the attention himself, but John constantly directed attention back to the coming Christ. ***"After me will come One more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."***

John's message painted the picture of a King of kings, who would come with great power and glory, but the One who came was not as many expected. Christ did have great power and glory, but was as unassuming as the next person in the crowd. We're simply told, ***"At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan."***

It is at this point that Jesus' Baptism veers far from every other. As Jesus stepped out of the Jordan, suddenly the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove. Then a loud, clear voice came from heaven, ***"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*** What was going on? Jesus was baptized just like us, but his heavenly Father followed up that Baptism by "anointing" or setting him apart from all others. God himself gave Jesus his public approval as the promised Savior and Son of God. Officially and publicly Jesus' work of redeeming or ransoming the world from its guilt of sin began that day—a journey that would only end at the cross of Calvary. In essence, Jesus was inaugurated into his public ministry of Servant Savior of the world at his Baptism.

For good reason the events surrounding Christ's Baptism were like no other, but stepping back from those miraculous signs and the anointing of the Spirit, we see his Baptism was like no other too. Remember the purpose of John's Baptism! John was ***"preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"***. It was literally a baptism of repentance "into the sending away of all the guilt of sins". That means that John's Baptism, like ours today, was meant for sinners, who needed forgiveness. For sinners, like us, those waters of Baptism washed away all the guilt of their sins for all eternity. As those sins were sent away, the one baptized was baptized into the forgiveness of sins. They went from wallowing in the filth of the guilt of their sins to the holy purity of the forgiveness of the coming Christ. Baptism has always been intended for sinners. The holy don't need it.

Jesus didn't need it either! In fact, in Matthew's account, we're told John objected to Jesus even being baptized. He was sinless. From conception to that moment in time to the end of his life, not once did Jesus commit a single sin—not one selfish thought, not one hurtful word, not one loveless action. He was the holy and beloved Son of God, who ***"pleased"*** his heavenly Father with his sinlessness. Still Jesus was baptized, but why?

Jesus wasn't baptized for himself or his own sins, but for ours. Listen to his explanation to John's objections. **"Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."** John, as God's messenger, and Jesus, as God's Promise One, were obligated to inaugurate God's plan of salvation there in that way. Basically by insisting to be baptized, as our sinless Substitute Jesus put himself in our place as God the Father had sent him to do. Jesus put himself where we deserve to be—in the place where sinners ought to be—under the waters of baptism for forgiveness.

By putting himself in our place, our sinless Substitute willingly associated with sinful wretches like you and me. He put himself in our shoes so he could one day stand in our place on the cross to suffer the punishment we deserve, to lay lifeless in the tomb where you and I deserve to be for our sins. By putting himself in your place and mine, Jesus gave power to those waters of Holy Baptism through which he brings us into his forgiveness. Our sinless Substitute stands in our place that you and I may one day stand in his glory, so his heavenly Father may look on us and be **"well-pleased"**. Christ earned that for us by his "well-pleasing" life, death and resurrection.

By putting himself in our place under those waters of Holy Baptism, Jesus intimately connected us with his innocent death and his glorious resurrection. St. Paul once wrote to the Romans, **"...Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."** At our Baptism, our sinful natures were crucified and buried with Christ. At our Baptism, we were raised to live a new life. At our Baptism, all the great blessings of Jesus' Baptism and all that he accomplished and earned through his Christly work as God's Anointed Savior became yours and mine. All the merit he earned through the shedding of his blood and through his rising from the dead became ours. All the forgiveness we need for the impossible burden of sin's guilt became ours. All the new life we needed for our blind, dead, God-hating souls became ours. All the life eternal we needed, when we were condemned to an eternity in hell, became ours. For we, who so willingly hated God, all the reconciliation needed to restore that relationship with the holy God became ours. All the comfort and release our souls need when sin disturbs us became ours. All the glad confidence we need in the face of death became ours.

Because the sinless Son of God put himself in your place, when you were baptized, you were welcomed into God's family as God's child. The triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—placed his family name on you. St. Paul once wrote to the Galatians, **"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."** Clothed then with Christ's holiness, the holy God was **"well-pleased"** with you! Your new life began and has continued to today—not as a wretched slave, not as a messy sinner, but as a cleansed child of God. Even more amazing, because the King of kings put himself in your place, heaven now stands torn open for you too.

All that Jesus earned and accomplished through his Christly work became ours through water and the Word. Since I am baptized into Christ and the sending away of my sins through him, that makes my Baptism awesome and unique. It's the same for all who are baptized through water and the Word.

Yes, children and adults who are cleaned up will get messy again. The filth of sin will daily plague us, but Holy Baptism has changed our lives forever. Knowing that our sinless Substitute put himself in our place, even in Baptism, we can daily go back to the Lord and repent of those sins. We can daily stand firm in those waters made holy by Christ and be cleansed. We can daily defy sin and Satan and death. There in the daily remembrance of the miracle his Holy Spirit accomplished in our hearts, we can gladly proclaim the words of a new hymn, **"God's own child, I gladly say it: I am baptized into Christ! He, because I could not pay it, gave my full redemption price. Do I need earth's treasures many? I have one worth more than any that brought me salvation free, lasting to eternity."** Give thanks for the Baptism that was like no other for on that day Christ changed our lives forever! Amen.