

First Sunday after Epiphany: The Baptism of Jesus

“The Baptized Life”

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I. Intro

A. Well here we are—the first Sunday after Epiphany on the church calendar. The Christmas tree has come and gone, the outdoor Christmas lights are in a tangled heap in the corner of the garage, the Christmas cookies are now just a few crumbs in the bottom of a Tupperware. The ball in Times Square has dropped on another New Year’s Eve, and here we are now staring at a new year and another twelve months of living. How was your living last year? Any surprises? Big events? Blessed monotony? Sorrows and joys? Any regrets?

B. Today is also the Sunday when the church has traditionally reflected on the baptism of Jesus, as we’ve just read about in Mark 1. So let’s see if there’s anything in this story that will help us think about our lives in 2015.

The opening verses in Mark’s Gospel form a three-part prologue to his story of Jesus’ life.

1. The first part is the citation of Scripture from Isaiah, where Mark connects the story of Jesus to the ancient prophecies, making it clear that Jesus’ life is a long-predicted part of God’s plan.

2. The second part of the prologue is the baptism of Jesus;

3. The third part is his severe trial in the wilderness, the place where Jesus proves faithful where Israel did not as they wandered in the wilderness. And it is in this wilderness place that John the Baptist appears and begins to preach the promise of one more powerful than a prophet who will immerse those who repent in the Holy Spirit. John calls all Israel to repentance and baptism, which is remarkable because the Jews of that time used immersion in water only for Gentile

converts and for those who on occasion became unclean, disqualifying them for worship. Implied in John's preaching is that *all* Israel is defiled and needs to repent to prepare for a mighty act of God that John announces.

II. Jesus' baptism. And from the throngs of people from all of Judea and Jerusalem who responded to John's preaching, emerges a man from a distant place, Nazareth in Galilee, presenting himself to John to be immersed in the waters of the Jordan river. This is how Mark introduces us to Jesus.

- A. **Heaven torn open.** As Jesus comes up from the water, he sees heaven being torn open (v. 10). It is not just that heaven is opened, for this is a more specific verb that means to tear. What is simply opened can again be closed, but what is torn open is not so easily put back. In other words, when Jesus is baptized, all heaven breaks loose.

The Jordan river was more than just a river; it was the boundary between the wilderness and the Promised Land. It's interesting that Joshua (Josh. 3:7-17), Elijah (2 Kgs 2:8), and Elisha (2 Kgs 2:14) all parted the Jordan river as a sign of their divine power. How wonderful it is that, standing there in the Jordan, Jesus' power does something far greater—he parts heaven itself. Heaven's boundaries are torn open and God is now on the loose in our midst. Ready or not, God comes to us in Jesus. Jesus' baptism fulfills the hope of Isaiah who said (64:1), "Oh, that you would tear the heavens and come down,...!" And God did, in the man Jesus. Mark uses this same verb again at the end of the gospel in 15:38 where the curtain of the Jerusalem Temple is torn from top to bottom—and remember, that curtain was about 60 feet long—again showing that the barrier between God and us has been torn down.

- B. **The Descent of the Spirit.** Mark tells us also that when Jesus came up out of the water, the Spirit came down. The descent of God's power did not swoop down like an eagle or a falcon, but quietly and gently like a

dove, a bird not of prey but of peace. At creation Genesis tells us the Spirit of God fluttered above the primeval waters to bring order out of chaos. When the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus, the new creation has begun, showing God's intent to transform the chaos of fallen humanity as Jesus begins to create a new people for God.

- C. **A Voice from heaven.** And thirdly, when Jesus was baptized, a voice came from heaven, that same voice we read about in Ps 29, the powerful and majestic voice of the LORD. It said "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." The voice is God the Father speaking to Jesus, but Mark allows all of us to hear this pronouncement so that we can better appreciate the story of Jesus' life that follows in the gospel. God's pronouncement, "you are my Son" echoes Ps 2:7 and Isa 42:1, which speak of God's Son as a title for the Davidic kings of Israel. Right at the beginning of the story Mark lets his readers in on the secret that God has chosen Jesus to rule over his people with royal power as a king. Mark wants us to know as we read the rest of Jesus' life the tragic irony that neither the Gentiles nor the Jewish leaders recognized Israel's king. God again announces Jesus as his Son to Peter, James, and John at the Transformation in Mark 9:7, and Jesus tells them that they must not tell others until after his resurrection. In other words, Jesus was a king, but his kingship was not like that of the previous Davidic kings. His kingship could be understood only after his death and resurrection, for his kingship would not be limited to a time and place but would rule over all of life for eternity.

III. **Why was Jesus baptized?** All of this is what Mark wants us to know about Jesus before we read the rest of the story. But what is less clear is why was Jesus baptized in the first place? Have you ever wondered about that? Why did he appear at a baptism for the repentance of sin? Clearly Jesus' baptism was the occasion on which his identity began to be revealed, and his public ministry began. But couldn't all of those wonderful things about Jesus have been made known in some other

setting? If Jesus was sinless, why would he have stepped forth from the crowd at just that moment? Does it mean that in his younger days Jesus had sinned who came to John's baptism to reform his ways? Does it mean that Jesus was after all subordinate to John the Baptist? Thinking about the answer to this question might help you to better understand how you should live in 2015.

A. **The meaning of repentance.** The Greek word translated "repentance" was in use before the NT was written. It meant to change one's mind, and did not necessarily imply sin. New Testament writers used it to speak of a change of mind toward one's relationship with God. But because all human beings are fallen creatures, to change one's mind in this context means to call sin what God calls sin and to turn from it. It means to be sorry about one's sins, accept God's forgiveness, and stop sinning. But as one turns *from* sin, one turns *toward* God. When we repent we don't simply stop doing something; we also start doing something else. For instance, we don't just stop behaving badly; we start behaving the way God tells us is right in his word. So there is a positive sense of this word that represents openness to God's work in our lives. You cannot be open to what God will do in your life until you stop whatever sin the Spirit calls you to repent of.

When Jesus came to be baptized by John, he did not need to confess and turn from sin, because he was sinless. But because Jesus was a human being he did need to embrace God's call on his life and open himself to God's plan. We must not forget that Jesus was fully human. John the Baptist was calling all Israel to acknowledge and turn from their sin in preparation to receive God's grace offered in Jesus Christ. You cannot truly receive God's gift of life until you acknowledge how undeserving you are of it. So when Jesus presents himself for baptism, he is consenting and cooperating in this call to Israel to turn to God's unfolding purposes, to the new work that God is about to do, even though it would cost Jesus his very life. And although Jesus does not come to baptism for forgiveness of his own sin, he does come to identify with his people, consenting to the mission for which he had been born: to die for them, to put himself under God's judgment for the sin of the human race. And so Jesus' baptism was the first step on that difficult road of obedience that

will inevitably lead to his violent and redemptive death. This is why in other gospel accounts when John the Baptist protests Jesus' desire to be baptized, Jesus says "It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15). For you to fulfill all righteousness, you must open yourself to God's will for your life.

1. **Jesus lived intentionally.** From this story of Jesus' baptism, we can see that Jesus lived the baptized life intentionally, obediently, and joyfully without regret. He lived it intentionally. He did not drift into God's plan for his life, but he sought it out and embraced it. Jesus didn't just happen to run into John the Baptist one day while lounging around Nazareth; Jesus left his hometown of Nazareth in Galilee and traveled many miles, probably on foot, to find John the Baptist and the work God was doing in John's baptism. The shortest distance from Nazareth directly east to the Jordan was about 20 miles. But Mark says when John was baptizing, people from the whole *Judean* countryside and *Jerusalem* were coming to him, suggesting a spot much further south on the river, perhaps as far as seventy miles from Nazareth. Jesus was proactive and intentional about following God's call on his life.
2. **Jesus lived obediently.** Regardless of where he was or what was happening to him, Jesus lived obediently to God's commandments and calling. Consider that it was the Spirit who led Jesus out into the desert wilderness, into a very difficult time when Satan himself attacked Jesus. This was a test of Jesus' resolve to be the man God called him to be. And in those 40 days of spiritual attack, Jesus persisted in his baptized life and his resolve to obey God.

And notice this about Jesus when he was led into a place of testing by the Spirit. He didn't rationalize and say, "Well the Spirit led me here so it's probably ok to give in to Satan a little." No, even when he was in the place the Spirit had led him to, when temptation presented itself, Jesus was obedient to how God wanted him to live. To live obediently means no rationalization.

3. Jesus lived joyfully through the Holy Spirit. Luke's gospel tells that when Jesus saw God working through his life, he was "full of joy through the Holy Spirit" (Lk 10:21). Even when facing the pain and shame of the cross, Hebrews tells us that Jesus endured it "for the joy" that would follow (Heb 12:2). As Jesus lived out his baptized life, as difficult a life as it was, with joy because he was living as God had planned for him to live.

IV. Living the baptized life in 2015. Let's see what we learn from Jesus' baptism about living the baptized life in 2015. There is an interesting ambiguity in the Isaiah quotation at the start of Mark's gospel. Within the story Mark is telling we read the Isaiah prophecy to mean, "I [God] will send my messenger [John the Baptist] ahead of you [Jesus], who will prepare your way." But as we reflect on the story of Jesus' life, we can read that same prophecy as, "I [God] will send my messenger [Jesus] before you [disciples/readers] who will prepare your way." Because Jesus was baptized, we, too, can live the baptized life: intentionally, obediently, and joyfully without regrets. For when Jesus had completed the mission of his earthly life, he released the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit that had descended upon him, to fill all people who have a change of heart about their relationship with God, all who come to God through the gateway Jesus has provided. Let's live this year with more openness toward God, who has said, "I know the plans I have for you, ... plans to give you hope and a future" (Jer 29:11).

The baptized life is a life lived intentionally. *What would your life look like if you lived more intentionally in 2015? Would you be as busy as you are? There are many good things to do, but God has not called you to all of them. Even Jesus did not heal every sick person while he was on earth. Would you spend your time in the same old ways or with the same people? What is God calling you to embrace in 2015? How will you open yourself to what he has for you this year? How far out of your way are you willing to go to follow God's call on your life? The time is now to put aside procrastination and to open yourself to what God has for you in 2015.*

The baptized life is a life lived obediently. *How would your life change if you lived more obediently in 2015? What might you have to stop doing? What would you like to start doing?* If you are here today and have never acknowledged your sin to the Lord, received his forgiveness, and invited him into your life, now is a good time to do that. Today is the day of your salvation. Open your life to be the person God created you to be. And then, if you haven't been baptized, present yourself for the sacrament to embrace God's call on your life to take your place in the new creation. And for those of us who have been baptized, even those who have been walking decades with the Lord, every new year, every season of life brings new temptations and challenges. What needs to change in your life to live more obediently in the situation you find yourself in in 2015? You've never been in this place in life before.

The baptized life is a life lived joyfully without regrets. *How would it feel to live more joyfully in 2015?* Jesus had no regrets about his life because he lived it intentionally and obediently, knowing that even in his most difficult moments God was working to achieve his perfect purposes. And that gave Jesus great joy. There is no greater joy than living the life God created you to live. Could 2015 be a year you live without regrets? Could it be a joy-filled year, even in the face of the difficulties you expect and those you don't?

The baptism, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ brought the Holy Spirit into the world and to God's people. We live in that power day by day. All that we need to live intentionally, obediently, and joyfully is provided for us in the **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control** that the Spirit grows within us in ever-increasing measure. How can you bring the power of the Spirit to bear on your life this year? The Lord is calling each of us to live the baptized life in 2015. Let's live it intentionally! Let's live it obediently! Let's live it joyfully! Exciting times ahead! Amen.