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The Baptism of our Lord

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“ ‘Mark’ these words!”
Text: Mark 1:4-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

St. Mark is a man of few words. He wrote the shortest of the Gospels. He’s one of those people who’s probably difficult to have a conversation with. You ask him a question, and he always gives you a real short answer. But just because St. Mark is a man of few words doesn’t mean he has little to say. On the contrary, when he speaks, his words are loaded. They are dense and packed with meaning. He wants to make you think.

And so it is with the Holy Gospel for today. Mark tells us of Jesus’ baptism using only three short verses. That might lead some to believe that it must not be very important. But with Mark that’s not true. He tells us because it is important. He puts it right at the beginning of His Gospel. And the words that He uses are words packed with meaning. It is as if Mark is telling us, “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*” So today, let us hear.

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee . . .” Jesus *came*. Simple words, but with meaning. They tell us that Jesus was there intentionally. He didn’t just happen to be in the vicinity, see some ruckus going on by the Jordan, and wander over to see what was going on. Jesus *came*, and for this very reason He came. The journey was not short, nor was it easy. He left mother and family behind. He came in order to begin His work of salvation; to deliver all people from the bondage of sin. Jesus *came*. He didn’t have to. He *wanted* to. . . . **What do you do when you don’t have to do anything?** What is on your mind? What do you want? Jesus came to be baptized. Because that is what He wanted. Because we were on His mind. And so He came. Willingly. Purposefully. Intentionally. Good news for us.

“ . . . and [He] was baptized by John in the Jordan.” Mark makes it sound like Jesus was baptized just like everyone else. No difference. He does not include the objections of John, like Matthew does. But it was not the same. Everyone else, we heard earlier in the Gospel, was baptized by John as they were **“confessing their sins.”** But Jesus did not have any sins to confess. He did not inherit any sin, nor commit any sins. In fact, He should have been repulsed by that water! Talk about a cesspool! That water was filled with just about every sin imaginable. Sins washed off

the multitude of sinners. You name the sin, and Jesus is hip-deep in it. Idolatry, adultery, sexual immorality, murder, theft, hate, prejudice, lying, selfishness, coveting, pride, greed, lust – and Jesus jumps right into that putrid, toxic water! And lets it be poured all over Him. All the filth. All the sin. It's disgusting.

But His Father's not disgusted, but delighted! So is the Holy Spirit! The First and Third Persons of the Holy Trinity are *thrilled* that the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, receives John's baptism. They're elated that He's drenched in this sin-infested water. And so the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus, and the Father speaks His approval: **"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."** He *doesn't* say (as we probably would): Get out of that disgusting water! Go clean yourself up! No, this is exactly right. This is the will of God. For Jesus to stand with sinners. For Jesus to be washed in our sin, to take our sin, to become the sinner. For Jesus to take our place.

"And as [Jesus] came up out of the water, immediately He saw the heavens opening . . ." Actually, a literal rendering of that verse would read: **"He saw Heaven being torn open."** Now that's quite an unusual word to use there. But remember, Mark, the man of few words, chooses his words carefully, and so here uses a word he uses only one other time in his whole Gospel – and that was right after Jesus died on the cross, when Mark reports, **"the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom."** (Mk 15:38) And so with this word, Mark connects the beginning of His Gospel with the end. He connects Jesus' baptism with His crucifixion. That we may know that in Jesus taking our sins upon Himself in His baptism, and taking them to the cross, that the division that separated God and man, that closed Heaven to us, is abolished! With our sin on Jesus, and with His death for our sin, Heaven is open again! We are right with God. Our sins are forgiven, washed away.

And so no wonder the Father is pleased! And no wonder that **"the Holy Spirit descend[s] upon [Jesus] like a dove."** For in, with, and under the baptized body of Jesus, the world is being re-created. For as we heard, the Holy Spirit hovered over the water in the *first* creation in Genesis 1. Now in Mark 1 the Holy Spirit is again over the water. It is no coincidence. For just as in the beginning the Word of God spoke and brought life and light to all, so now the Word of God made flesh acts to bring life and light to all. In Him is a new beginning, a fresh start, another Genesis. A resurrection. In Him everything is again very good, for He is taking away the sin of the world.

And all of this He now gives to you. Did you hear? It is what John said right before he baptized Jesus: **"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."** Again, do not let the brevity of the words obscure their importance for you. For they tell us that just as Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptized, so He comes here, and to every place where His Word is combined with water, **to baptize you**. The hand may be mine, or that of another equally unworthy pastor, but it is your Saviour who baptizes you. He is still in

the water with sinners, for sinners, saving sinners. With you, for you, saving you. Not ashamed of you, but washing your sins off of you, and giving you the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit who descends on sons of God, which by virtue of your baptism is what you are. Through the heavens torn open at Christ's baptism, the Father looks upon you and sees not the sinner, but a forgiven, resurrected, dearly loved son, with whom He is well-pleased. Not because of anything you have done or will do, but because of what Jesus did for you. Because Jesus in the water means that this water is for us a *life giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit*. (Small Catechism) And so here we are a new creation. By water and the spirit, *the old has gone, the new has come*. (2 Cor 5:17-18)

Such an honor we do not deserve. The Father has every right to look down from Heaven and say to us: Go clean yourself up. But not only *couldn't* we do that, we *wouldn't*. For on our own, we cannot see ourselves for who we are; we cannot see Jesus for who He is. And so we either think our sin is not so great and so of course we'll be saved! Or we think our sin is too great for us to possibly be saved. Today, God sets the record straight. Yes your sins are great, they are plenteous, and they are serious. Deadly serious. That's why God sent His Son to deal with them. No angel, no man could! Only His Son. To atone for them. To take them off of you and put them on Himself. To die for them in your place, that you may live. Just as He lives.

And not just any ol' life do we now live, but as St. Paul said, a new life. His life. A Christ life. Not because we have to, but because what do you do when you don't have to do anything? For, child of God, you do not have to do anything! You are forgiven. Your salvation is secure. Jesus' death and resurrection is your death and resurrection, and there nothing you can add to that! Nothing. So what do you do when you don't have to do anything? You don't do nothing - you live the Christ life. For that is who you are. Confessing your sins and receiving your Saviour's forgiveness. Eating not locusts and wild honey, but the true body and blood of your Saviour, given and shed for you. And living for others as Christ lived for you. Such an honor we do not deserve. But what a privilege has been given to us. To serve, to speak, to live as the new creation that you are as a baptized child of God.

Perhaps others will think you crazy. No matter. Your Father is delighted, **for** [baptized into Christ] **you are His beloved son, and with you He is well-pleased.**

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord unto everlasting life. Amen.

(Due to a particularly difficult week, this sermon is mostly a reprise from 2006.)