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“The Word of God In the Water”

Text: Mark 1:4-11; Genesis 1:1-5; Romans 6:1-11

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

Jesus is baptized. That fact surprises and confuses many Christians. Which is okay, because it surprised and confused John the Baptist, too. So if that's you, you're in good company.

For John was blasting away at sinners and proclaiming fearful judgment on them. He called them to repent and receive this baptism for the forgiveness of sins. And a great many did. So when Jesus shows up with the sinners, that just doesn't seem right. Because He's not a sinner. He doesn't need forgiveness. John, in fact, should be baptized by Him, not the other way around. He is the one so much mightier than John that John is not even worthy to stoop down and untie his sandal. So baptize Him? Out of the question. John should do like the Wise Men did - fall down and worship Him, not baptize Him.

And yet, Mark tells us, He did. Because Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). And so He comes with the sinners to be baptized. And He's not just play acting, *pretending* to be a sinner. He really *wants* to be the sinner. But not with His own sins, but with yours. He wants all your sin on Him that it be no longer on you. And so He steps into the Jordan River to do that. To give baptism the power to forgive your sin and make you children of God.

For as it is asked in the Small Catechism: *How can water do such great things?* The answer tells us: *Certainly not just water, but the Word of God in and with the water does these things, along with the faith which trusts this Word of God in the water.* So today we look and see with John - **there is the Word of God in the water**. The Word of God **made flesh** steps into the water - not for Himself, but for you. He, the Son of God, is baptized for you, a sinner, that you, a sinner, be baptized a son of God. He is where you are so that you may be where He is. And so your baptism is not play acting either, or what marks your effort to be a son of God. No. **Baptism is Jesus for you**. Your baptism not *imitating* what Jesus did, but *receiving* what Jesus did for you. Or as the catechism put it: *trusting the Word of God in the water*. That all He did He did for you, and all His promises are true for you.

But not just that Jesus was baptized but what happened when He was is important too, and helps us understand what is going on here. For, Mark tells us, along with the water is the Spirit and the voice of the Father from heaven: ***You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.***

Notice: *Water, Spirit, and voice*. Just as it was in the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth. *It is how God creates life*. And what God creates is good. For although we did not read the entire creation account, you know how much of it goes, and the repeated refrain we hear there: ***and God saw that it was good***. And isn't that what the Father is saying when Jesus is baptized? He sees what is happening, that His Son is standing with sinners, being baptized for you, in the water, and He says: *this is good. I am well pleased*. This is exactly what Jesus is sent to do. This is the new beginning that God promised after Adam and Eve plunged themselves and the world into sin. This is the beginning of the new creation - how God is going to make everything good again. Including you.

I always think it helpful that we hear this account of Jesus' baptism shortly after the new year has begun but long enough into it that most people have already broken their New Year's resolutions! Because it helps us remember that our new beginning doesn't come from our own resolutions or our own efforts. Good thing, right? Because how often do we fail? How often do we fall back into the same old habits? How often do we make the same resolutions year after year after year? **We want to make ourselves new, but find out how powerful the old is**. And eventually the old always wins, doesn't it? Oh, maybe we manage to improve a thing or two and keep some resolutions - but the old always wins. Because, someday, no matter what we do, we're all going to die.

Who will it be this year? Some we expect, perhaps; but many that we don't. Some will die after long lives, some after long battles with illness, but some will be taken tragically and quickly and in the prime of their lives. And we know: *this is not good*. With this God is not well pleased. This is not how it was meant to be. In the beginning, God created life and man chose death. For that's what sin is - going it on our own, separation from the source of our life.

And yet we're still surprised, aren't we? When we sin and things don't work out. When we still try to go it on our own - whether that is apart from God or apart from the people He's given us to take care of us; when we rebel and think we know better . . . but just make things worse. And things die. Friendships die, relationships die, goodness dies. *We want to make ourselves new, but find out how powerful the old is*.

But when Jesus steps into the Jordan that day, it is a real new beginning. Because it's not the one *we're* doing, but the one *God* is doing. And it's Paul that bring it all together for us and ties it to baptism. For, Paul says, ***Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.***

Now first of all, realize what an utterly strange and amazing phrase you just heard there, but which is so easy to overlook: *his death*. Jesus' death. *God's* death. And it's His because He took it; because He stepped into the Jordan that day to take it. The God who is life and created life, not death, and who never intended for any to die, makes death His own. And for one reason only: *to conquer it*. The enemy that we could never conquer, He does. **For you**. He didn't need to conquer it - God wasn't going to die; He cannot die. He dies to raise you. He conquers death to give you the victory. *That just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*

And there it is - Paul said it: *newness of life. New creation*. Jesus takes your sin and death and all your old and takes it to the cross with Him, and rises from death to raise you, with Him, to a new life. His life. And that, Paul says, happens for you in baptism. There you die; you get the awfulness of death over with. There you are raised with Christ; enemy defeated. There you are re-created, made new; the voice of the Father saying of you too: *with you I am well pleased.*

And that's the second utterly amazing thing here: *that with you God is well pleased*. We work so hard to be pleasing to others: to teachers, to bosses, to friends, to parents, to the boy or girl, the man or woman we want to like us, to coaches, to strangers, even to ourselves - yet how often does that end in disappointment, how often we fall short, no matter how hard we try.

But here's the good news: *with you God is well pleased!* Not because of what you do or accomplish, but because of Jesus. Baptized into Him, you are now good and new creations, sons and daughters of God living a new life. A life re-connected to the source of your life, continually receiving the forgiveness and life you need, putting down the old and raising up the new. That's what happens when you confess your sins and hear those words: *I forgive you all your sins*. That's what happens when you come and receive the Body and Blood of your Saviour. The new life begun in baptism continues and is strengthened and fed. And you leave here new. You may not see it or feel it, but it is true nonetheless.

For when Jesus stepped into the Jordan that day, everything changed. John sensed it - He knew this wasn't right. But it was, in this sense: by this "not right" Jesus was making everything right and good again. A new beginning, a new start, and a new end for you.

For *How can water do such great things? Certainly not just water, but the Word of God in and with the water does these things, along with the faith which trusts this Word of God in the water*. And Jesus is still in the water, here, for you. Epiphanied, manifested, revealed to you as the Son of God, your sin-bearer, your death-taker, your life-giver, your re-creator, your Saviour. Trust this Word of God in the water and all that He has done for you. For all that He has done for you He here gives to you. And it is very good.

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