

Christ's Baptism

Mark 1:4-11 CEB ⁴ John was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. ⁵ Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. ⁶ John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." ⁹ About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. ¹⁰ While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. ¹¹ And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

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We have such a warped view of prophets and prophecy that I may not be able to broaden and correct our view and our understanding. For most of our lives we have invariably heard the term "prophecy" used to mean predicting the future. That is such a limited definition that it warps and distorts how we read scripture. Moses is hailed as the greatest prophet that Israel had known. Moses did little if any predicting of the future. But he was a great leader who had a special relationship with God and who brought God's message to the people.

The prophet Samuel was raised in the life and culture of the priesthood. He, too, delivered God's message to the people. Sometimes that was good news, sometimes it was bad. The prophet Nathan seems to have been part of King David's court. It was he who pronounced God's judgment on David for his adultery with Bathsheba and David's maneuvers to kill her husband.

And from Elijah onward, the prophets are a counterbalance to the monarchy. They act out the raw power of God, confronting the royal families and challenging the government. But for the last few centuries before Christ, there were no prophets in Israel.

Judaism was longing for a revival of prophecy, so John's appearance and message caused great excitement. Like the prophets of old, he took on the leadership of Israel fearlessly. He called them a brood of vipers and didn't restrain his criticism of them. John the Baptist certainly made the officials and leaders of his day uncomfortable and his criticism of the king eventually cost him his head.

John preaches about repentance and baptism and forgiveness. It's easy to misunderstand John's message. Many of us were taught that we have to repent and ask for forgiveness in order for our sins to be forgiven, and then we have to be baptized for the forgiveness to actually happen. But when we think about it, one of Jesus' most powerful parables provides a clearer picture. The prodigal son repents, that is, he changes his mind, he turns around, and he heads back home to his father. But he never gets the chance to beg for forgiveness. His father has forgiven him long ago and welcomes him back profusely.

John Calvin said that repentance isn't placed first, as if it was the foundation upon which forgiveness occurred, or as if it induced or caused God to begin to be gracious to us. People are commanded to repent, not because that forces God to forgive,

but so that we can recognize and welcome the reconciliation which is offered to us. Repentance doesn't change God; it changes us. Right faith and good works prepares the way, it opens the channels for the Lord to come into our heart.

So, what about baptism? Baptism wasn't a new concept. The Essenes engaged in ritual washings. Gentiles who became Jews underwent a kind of baptism. John the Baptist does talk about baptism and the forgiveness of sins in the same breath. Baptism isn't the cause of forgiveness but it is a *sign* of forgiveness. So, the baptism of Jesus was embarrassing to early Christians. Why did the sinless Jesus need to be baptized? Gregory of Nazianzus, searching for an answer to this embarrassing story, proposed that in his baptism, Jesus cleansed the water, he hallowed it.

I think that there is a better way to understand this event, one that matches the character and life of Christ. Jesus was baptized with sinners, showing his unrestrained identification with them. This reaching down to them received divine approval. While John announced one more powerful than himself, the Spirit descending as a dove indicated that this will be unconventional power, power made manifest in weakness and tenderness.

The baptism of Jesus established his identity. God proclaimed, "You are my Son, whom I dearly love." Jesus is who God says he is. The baptism of believers declares that we are who God says we are. In Christ, we are sons and daughters of God. But while our identity as brothers and sisters with Christ is declared at our baptism, it is only a word until it is revealed with convincing power in the unfolding of our life and death . . . and resurrection.

For Jesus, and for us, baptism is a public ritual, signifying that faith is not private piety or intellectual rumination. In our baptism we acknowledge our connection to others and to the church. It is a public confession of our faith, declared not in words, but in action. It is an outward sign of the grace we experience internally. That is why baptism is called a sacrament, because a sacrament is an outward action that expresses an internal grace..

Finally, there's the Holy Spirit and the dove. The text says that the heavens were "ripped apart" or "torn open." What is opened can be closed, but what is torn cannot easily be restored to its previous state. This openness between heaven and earth is huge and what takes place is not something that can be undone. And at this point the gospel accounts offer different details. Luke writes of a dove descending bodily. And it sounds like perhaps others beside Jesus heard God's voice. But Mark infers that only Jesus heard the voice. And Mark says the Spirit descends *in* or *into* Jesus, not *on* him. Mark means that something entered Jesus, not that a bird perched on his head. When you think about it, that's rather scary. God is loose in the world. Most of the time, we'd be more comfortable with God at some distance, enthroned in heaven and occupied with the heavenly court. But Emmanuel, God here with us? That's an uncomfortable thought if we think of God as judge, always looking for our faults. However, the parable of the prodigal son teaches that God's love is steadfast, compassionate, and forgiving before we even seek forgiveness.

Karl Barth suggested that when God claimed Jesus in this story it revealed the essence of the gospel: the amazing claim that God, rather than remaining hidden in the heights of heaven, instead descends to the depths of earthly life in order to be seen and heard by us finite creatures.

Our salvation isn't something that occurs suddenly and only after death. What Christians call salvation can be aptly described as the acquisition, the internalizing, of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit makes us aware of our need, our sin, reveals the spirit of Christ, and empowers us for service in the kingdom and in the church. The culmination of this process is to be totally immersed in God, to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. That is not something to be feared, but rather, a great gift to be welcomed. Amen.

Open yourselves to receive God's Spirit,
the Holy Spirit, into your heart and soul,
so that you may experience and live out your salvation.