

The Baptism of Our Lord, Sunday, January 7, 2024

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Baptized New with Jesus

Mark 1:4–11

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when He came up out of the water, immediately He saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:9–11)

Happy New Year! . . . but, one week in, and it looks like the problems are all still the same. Same politics, same economy, same wars, and, closer to home, same me.

3.

I don't say this to take the wind out of your sails. By all means, keep those resolutions you've made. Start those new habits. Clean house. Reprioritize your calendar. Throw out the rest of the cookies and put the treadmill in front of the fridge, if you want to. Nothing wrong with those things. We should strive for more discipline and order in our lives. We should be strategic about how we spend our time and money. We all need the reminder to put people ahead of things and to hold our faith at the center of all that we do and are. Best of all then, read your Bible more. Hunger for more Holy Communion. Seek Jesus and His kingdom. Open your eyes toward people in your life. Actively look for ways to love them.

And yet . . . despite our new resolve, despite whatever hopes and dreams we have for the new year, the problem remains the same. Of course, the problem with the new year isn't anything about the year. Aside from being sick last weekend, I have no real complaints about 2024. It's been perfectly fine in its own way. If you ask my kids, last night's snowstorm has done a lot to redeem this first week. I only wish it had fallen on a different day. But there's still this glaring problem with the new year: I came into it with the old me. And so did you.

I don't just mean the old me of bad habits and things I'd like to change about myself. That's surface level. By the old me, I mean the old sinful self. We're still coiled and coiled and coiled. Twisted up in sin. How often do we do something, turn some way,

yet all we keep thinking about, all we see is ourselves. We measure things by how well they please us. We coil with our time. We coil with our energy. We coil in the things we talk about. The good that we think about doing, we don't do, and the things we know we shouldn't do and say, we keep right on doing. Maybe it's the way you ignore your wife, or yell at your husband, or lecture your siblings, or buy compulsively, or crack open another bottle, or scroll mindlessly, or let your eyes wander. The old me is just as good as ever at running over other people without thinking of them or listening to them. So the saying is true: as much as things change, they stay the same . . . *I stay the same.*

The British writer G. K. Chesterton once called sin "a fact as practical as potatoes." He wrote, "Whether or no man could be washed in miraculous waters, there was no doubt at any rate that he wanted washing." He remarked on the absurdity of some theologians of his day, the early twentieth century, who "essentially deny human sin, which they can see in the street." Once you know what to look for, the fact of original sin seems universal and indisputable, year in and year out.

2.

But Mark does tell of something new: John the Baptist **appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins** (v 4). Repentance for the forgiveness of sins may not sound like a winning message. Many churches in our day prefer *not* to preach about sin. They want to be uplifting and inspirational. They want to make people happy and feel good about themselves. John wasn't like that, and neither is God's Word. I think the truth, even when it's hard, is more important. Jesus said, "**The truth will set you free**" (Jn 8). How people responded to John! They went out to him by the droves and were **baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins** (v 5).

The need to be washed led to baptism. The desire to be rid of the old and to become new landed them in the water. Instead of denying sin, they wanted to be rid of it. A baptism of repentance does demand something. It demands that we face our sin head on instead of ignoring it, covering it, minimizing it, or explaining it. But, for John, that wasn't all. The key to baptism is the one who comes after John: "**After me comes he who is mightier than I. . . . I've baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit**" (Mark 1:7, 8). And then **Jesus came** (Mark 1:9).

This is the very first thing we hear about adult Jesus: He **came and was baptized by John in the Jordan** (Mark 1:9). What John began, Jesus, now about thirty years old, would complete, fulfill, and finish. He stepped into the water. He underwent baptism. **And when He came up out of the water, immediately He saw the heavens torn open**

and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased” (Mark 1:9–11). It’s an Epiphany! The magi came to worship the infant Jesus as the Son of God. Now, in the water, the Son of God is made known again, this time to the people of Israel.

You might notice, however, that Mark says nothing about Jesus repenting or confessing sin. The reason should be obvious: Jesus had no sin. Because He was conceived of the virgin Mary by the Holy Ghost, He was by nature what man had been in the beginning: holy, righteous, and untouched by original sin. This man has no need of forgiveness for Himself. In that, He is the new Man, really and truly *new*—like us in our humanity but not like us in our sin.

Why, then, would He be baptized? It still had everything to do with sin. Because He came to be numbered with sinners. He was baptized *into* sin and *on account of* sin—not His own, mind you, but yours. He puts Himself in the water. With Him comes the Holy Spirit. With Him is the Father’s good pleasure. And be sure of this: Here at the beginning, Jesus already has His eyes on the end. He’s looking toward the cross and empty tomb. From the very beginning, He fills baptism with His own righteous life, His perfect death, and His victorious resurrection. It’s all there with Him in the water.

1.

Because Jesus is there, baptism can’t just be a symbolic act. It doesn’t just represent something spiritual that happens to a person. St. Peter tells us, “**Baptism now saves**” (1 Peter). This saving gift brings with everything Jesus did and won. In other words, Holy Baptism actually does something. It isn’t just plain water. The water is infused with Jesus. It delivers His gifts. Blessed by the Holy Trinity and marked for a holy purpose, baptism actually has brought something new into this world of sin. Indeed, it *makes* new, holy, righteous, and forgiven. It makes *you* new, holy, righteous, and forgiven.

What we see at Jesus’ baptism happened at yours. Jesus, who showed His willingness to be with sinners in the water, stepped into the water with you. He brought His death and resurrection with Him. The Holy Spirit, who swept down to hover over the water in the beginning and descended on Jesus like a dove at His baptism, came to dwell with you through Holy Baptism. God the Father, who spoke creation into existence in the beginning and proclaimed Jesus His beloved Son at the Jordan River, has named you through Holy Baptism as His own, His beloved child.

Yes, the world remains dark, our sin is deep, and death is strong, but you have been made new in Holy Baptism. When Jesus was baptized, the heavens were torn open. When He died, the temple curtain was torn in two. Torn means that it was divided by

force, ripped apart, a breach made, the old gives way to the new. What does it mean? It means that Jesus opens heaven to us through Holy Baptism. It means that the old covenant of animal sacrifices has been replaced by His once-for-all-including-you sacrifice. It means that by force He has divided us . . . from our sin and death and hell.

Our dirt isn't too dirty for Jesus. Our dark isn't too dark. Our death isn't too strong. He came to be with us in the water. He doesn't shun us. He is with us. It's in the water that He shows His love for us. The new man makes us new, for **do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore 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** (Rom 6:3–4).

This is why we make the sign of the cross. With that sign, we grab hold of our baptism again and claim it as our own. Martin Luther encourages every Christian to begin the new day by making the sign of the cross together with the words "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." With those words, we step back into Holy Baptism. The only two options are to be dead to sin and alive in Christ, or to be alive to sin and dead to Christ. Holy Baptism doesn't leave us with an option. It means that we have died with Christ and been raised with Christ. His life is powerfully at work in us. As He died, rose, and ascended into heaven, so He also lives in us through Holy Baptism.

St. Paul said, "**Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has any dominion over Him. For the death He died He died to sin, once for all, but the life He lives He lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus**" (Rom 6:8–11). And so we are, not just once at our baptism, but every new day and every new year, this is what we are: dead to sin, and alive to God in Christ Jesus, because Jesus joined Himself to us in Holy Baptism.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
