

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

¹⁵ Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:13-17)

Why Baptize Jesus?

Did you ever have to do something totally pointless? Something that made no sense to you at all? A number of years ago, I saw the movie *Peggy Sue Got Married*. In this movie, Kathleen Turner goes back in time and relives a part of her senior year in high school. There's this memorable scene in which she tells her algebra teacher that she knows for a fact that she will never need algebra. There are many things in our lives which feel useless at the time we're doing them. In the word of God for this morning, John the Baptist had to do something that seemed totally useless to him: he had to baptize Jesus. What would the point of that be? Baptism is for the forgiveness of our sins. But Jesus didn't have any sins. It seemed more than pointless or useless, it seemed downright wrong to John. He knew he wasn't worthy to untie Jesus' shoes, let alone administer the sacrament of baptism to him. You know, when we look back at Jesus and we consider the gift of baptism, we might well agree with John. What's the point? **Why baptize Jesus?**

I.

Now this event took place before Jesus became famous. At this point in the gospel, the famous person is John the Baptist. He appeared in the desert of Judea and began to baptize people in the River Jordan. The Bible tells us that all Jerusalem and Judea made the long, hot trip out into the desert to be baptized by John. People were excited. They were hopeful. They wondered if John might be the promised Savior. On the day Jesus came to be baptized, he seemed like one more religious Jew among thousands. But John knew better. When Jesus presented himself for baptism, John objected. He said, **“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”** Jesus didn't argue with John, because John's point was true. Jesus did not need to be baptized. He had no sin to wash away. If anything, John the sinner needed Jesus' forgiveness. There was nothing that John could offer Jesus in the way of ministry.

But Jesus said, **“Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.”** What did Jesus mean? Simply put, he had to be perfect in our place. Jesus came to give us the righteous life that we can never attain on our own. What does it mean to be righteous? We might offer all kinds of definitions. We might say that being righteous means acting with integrity. You work as a bank teller and there's never any question about the way you handle the money because you're honest. Your spouse and children count on your promises, because you always keep your word. We might say that being righteous means fulfilling your responsibilities. Your children are warm and well-fed, they're loved and nurtured and encouraged. We might say that being righteous means that we attend church regularly and bring a generous offering and take part in the ministry God works here.

Each of those things would be a part of being righteous, but none of them goes nearly far enough. To be righteous, we would have to fulfill God's will. We would have to act and speak and think and feel exactly the way God calls us to every day of our lives, without fail. And we would have to do all that without regarding any of it as a burden. We'd live every second of our lives as God would have us live and at the same time rejoice that we get to live that way. That's being righteous. Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness. He came to live the perfect life that we cannot live. He came to do all that God wanted him to do, and that included being baptized, because baptism most certainly is God's will for every believer.

Jesus was righteous in our place, because we're all sinners. It's easy for us to minimize our sin. The Hebrew word for “sin” means missing the mark. Think of target practice. You load up, take aim and your shot goes wide left or right. But that picture can be misunderstood. It's easy for us to think of our sin in terms of being just a little short or just a little off target. Maybe I didn't hit the bull's eye, but I was close. That's not the

point. God's Word teaches us that we are totally and completely sinful. Even our best efforts are corrupt and worthless. We do our best and our best shot flies a mile wide of the target. It isn't even close. If you had someone working for you who tried their best but never succeeded in doing what they were supposed to do, you'd get rid of them, wouldn't you? You might not like it, but you'd have to. We'd like to think that close is good enough, but it isn't. God demands perfection. And our best effort isn't anywhere near perfection.

The truth is, most of the time, God doesn't get anything close to our best effort. Most of the time, we do just enough to make ourselves feel good, just enough to invoke our favorite excuses and justifications, just enough to tell ourselves that we're good people. But in God's book, we're sinners who deserve hell. We're sinners who have no excuses whatsoever. We're sinners who are just fooling ourselves. And the spiritual danger of fooling ourselves is that we will fail to trust in Jesus because we figure, "I'm a pretty good person. Of course, God forgives me." I have a true or false question on one of my catechism class worksheets that speaks to this point. Every year, most of the class gets it wrong. So, you kids who will be in class next year, pay attention, because I'm going to tell you the right answer. True or false: God forgives us when we try hard to change and be better people. What do you think? The answer is false. God does not forgive us when we try our best. He forgives when we trust that Jesus took our sin away. If we base our forgiveness on our own effort, we are going to spend eternity in hell.

So we needed Jesus to come and fulfill all righteousness for us. He lived the way God wants us to live – every thought that ever crossed his mind pleased God. Every feeling in Jesus' heart was pure and holy. Every word he spoke and every action he did always hit the mark, dead center of the bull's eye. So he was baptized, just as God wanted him to be. God gave that perfect life and heart to us. God wanted Jesus to take our place in death and in hell. On the cross, Jesus did just that. He suffered everything that our sin deserves. Three days later, he rose from the dead. That was God's way of saying that our sin is gone forever. We are paid for and forgiven. All Jesus' righteousness belongs to us.

He gave that righteousness to us in baptism. Baptism is the visible preaching of the gospel. In baptism, God gives us the perfect life that Jesus lived in our place. In baptism, God gives us the death and hell that Jesus suffered to pay for us. In baptism, God gives us the resurrection of our Lord. He rose, and we will rise from the dead. He rose, and we will live in with him heaven, when these bodies die. He rose, and we have a new life right here and now. Until this life ends, we live for him. To make all that ours, Jesus was baptized. Jesus is the power that makes our baptism real and powerful. That all began the day he came to John the Baptist. **Why baptize Jesus? To fulfill all righteousness.**

II.

My mother-in-law went to high school with Hillary Clinton – or Hillary Rodham as she was known then. They weren't close or anything. I don't even think they knew each other. But they were in the same school at the same time. Back then, nobody knew that one day, Hillary was going to be a legitimate candidate for the Democratic nomination to be president of the United States. You couldn't see that just by looking at her. You couldn't see who Jesus really was just by looking at him. He looked like any other Galilean Jew. He looked like an ordinary human being. So God revealed him. After Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the Jordan River. He saw heaven opened and the Spirit of God descended on him in the form of a dove. Then he – and apparently also the crowds who were there – heard a voice from heaven say, **"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."**

With these words, God announced who this unknown Galilean was. I've always wished that I could've been there that day and heard God speak from heaven. That is not the way God ordinarily works. It wasn't even the way he ordinarily worked then. In fact, the last time before this that God spoke out loud so that people could hear his voice was at Mt. Sinai, fifteen hundred years earlier when he gave the covenant that ruled the faith and life of his people for fifteen centuries. Then he waited to speak out loud again until he had a new covenant to offer his people. While he did speak out loud at least twice more during Jesus' lifetime, that was the last time any human will hear his voice on this side of heaven until the Lord returns.

God the Father identified Jesus as his Son. We often say that we're God's children and that's true. But we're his children by adoption. Here, the Father was telling his people that Jesus was more than what he appeared to be. This man was God the Son. He was one with the Father. He was almighty and everlasting. This text is one of those places where we see all three persons of the Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy

Spirit all working together and yet all standing beside each other. The church says that we worship one God in three persons. While the Bible doesn't use that formula, it is what God was showing his people here.

The Father said that he was well pleased with Jesus. Now, Jesus had not begun to preach and teach yet. He had not done a single miracle. No one even knew him yet. But he had been doing his Father's work for the last thirty years. He had been standing in our place, being holy and righteous for us. The only way that God was going to be pleased with his efforts was if he were perfect. And that was God's verdict on Jesus' life – really on his entire life, not just the first part because God knew how it would all come out. This isn't the only time that God said this about Jesus. He said it again at the end of his ministry. We'll hear these words again in three weeks when we study the Transfiguration of our Lord. Twice, at the beginning and near the end of his public life, God claimed Jesus as his beloved Son in whom he was well pleased. Twice, God said to those who were listening, "This is the Son of God. This is the Savior of the World."

He said it this time, because this is the beginning of his ministry. A little over six months ago, you installed me as your new pastor. My work among you began on that day. On the day of his baptism, God installed Jesus in his office and his public work began. Centuries earlier, the prophet Isaiah had looked forward to this day and said the Spirit of the Lord would be on Jesus in power. Years later, Peter looked back at this day and said that God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power. God anointed Jesus in his baptism. The Father gave him the Holy Spirit to serve in the public ministry. Even though Jesus was God, he served like any other human pastor – with the power of the Spirit. Only his miracles showed that he was God.

The word Christ means "the Anointed One." When I was small, I had the idea that Christ was Jesus' last name. That's not true. Christ is his title. Jesus is the Christ. That's why sometimes the Bible sometimes calls him Christ Jesus. Jesus is the Anointed One, the One God chose to go forth from heaven and defeat the devil and die and rise so that you and I will live forever. God began to show that miracle to the world at Jesus' baptism. On that day, Jesus began to reach out to claim us. He began the ministry that lasts right up until this moment. He began working to send the gospel to us. That makes this a momentous occasion. **Why baptize Jesus? To reveal the Son of God.**

Like the character Kathleen Turner played in that movie, I rarely use algebra in my adult life. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't have learned it back in high school. Only God knew what still lay in the future for us who are plodding along trying to figure out the value of x and y. Only the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, knew what lay in the future when Jesus was baptized. That baptism was totally necessary. It is a baptism that changed our lives. You and I know that our baptism is real because Jesus is real. Our baptism gives him to us. We know that our sins are forgiven and we can take comfort when our conscience assaults us because Jesus lived and died and rose for us. You and I know that we have the true Savior, because God embraced his Son in his baptism. Through his baptism, God reached out to us and made us his children. Amen.