

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.⁷ And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.¹⁰ As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:4-11)

Baptism is God's Testimony

Did you hear about the minor disaster we had here this week? On Thursday, one of the drains on the roof broke and hundreds of gallons of water poured into the Multipurpose Room. We had to cancel school on Thursday and we called the insurance company. But we had to start cleaning up and repairs even before the insurance adjustor came, because we had school on Friday and church today. So when he did come, he didn't see everything the way it was at its worst. We had to tell him about things that we did and the damage that was done. But how does he know what's true? We took pictures, of course. But is everything in those pictures? Part of the insurance adjustor's job is to discover if people are exaggerating their claims. Now, we don't plan to do that. But I bring it up because it illustrates the difficulty that testimony brings. How do you know if someone's testimony is true? Whether you're talking about the statements people give to an insurance adjustor or in court or simply the things people say to you, how do you know what testimony to believe? In large measure, it depends on who is speaking, doesn't it? We can point to evidence and other witnesses and all kinds of other factors. But it's still true that a person's credibility is a big part of whether we believe their testimony. Today, we have God's testimony. I don't just mean the scriptures. **Baptism is God's testimony.**

I.

Baptism is not something that we do. I know it seems like it is. We bring our children to the font, the pastor pours the water on that child's head. We pray and ask God's blessings. It seems obvious that this something we do. But that's an illusion. God hides himself in baptism. It's his work. The pastor is just the tool in his hand. So baptism is not our testimony of our commitment. It's not the congregation's testimony that it loves our children. **Baptism is God's testimony. Our baptism points us to Christ.**

You see that in the baptism that John the Baptist administered. Mark calls it **"a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."** He says about the people of Jerusalem and Judea, **"Confessing their sins, they were baptized ... in the Jordan River."** Baptism is the ultimate example of true repentance. We poor, guilty, tortured sinners come to God and we can do nothing but admit our guilt and throw ourselves on his mercy. And he forgives us. Baptism forgives us. God combines his promise of forgiveness and life with the water that the pastor pours on us, and he does a miracle. He gives us faith. He makes a promise to us that can never fail. He says that we are holy and clean and forgiven and that we will live with him in heaven forever.

Baptism is not just a symbol. It actually gives us those things. In Romans chapter 6, St. Paul says that we are baptized into Jesus' death and that in baptism, we die and rise with Christ. All that Jesus did for us on the cross is applied to us personally in the water and the word of holy baptism. So in a very real sense, baptism is God's testimony to us about Jesus. God is the one speaking and that person who is washed by water and the word receives spiritual renewal from the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist himself ties those things together. Mark says, **"This was his message: 'After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'"** John was pointing us to Jesus. The one who came after John is Jesus. Without his work, no baptism would matter, because we're baptized into his death and resurrection. But because baptism does join us to the work that Christ did, when we baptize, Jesus washes that child or that adult with the Holy Spirit because he always works in the gospel. So Christ baptizes us with more than empty water. He baptizes us with the Holy Spirit when the pastor baptizes us with water.

Why does that matter? When I was a vicar, I preached on Christmas Day. Part of my text (which we're actually going to talk about in Bible class today) talked about baptism, so on Christmas Day, I spoke about that. After church, one of the ladies in the congregation who had several children commented to me about how much she appreciated hearing about baptism in a sermon. I wasn't quite sure how to take her comment, other than to say thank you. But later I learned the rest of the story. She had had a little boy who drowned in an accident. She took great comfort in God's promises to her son in baptism.

God made those promises to every one of us parents. Our baptized children are washed and forgiven and they will live with him. That matters because as much as we love our children, they are born sinners. Every one of them is selfish by nature. Anyone who has actually raised children has to see that. I love my kids. But left to themselves, they would never get to heaven because they were sinners at the moment they were conceived. They inherited that sin from me. Their sinful nature hates God and leads them away from heaven. It shows itself every single day in selfish attitudes and actions. That's not just true about my kids. It's true about your kids, too. Every human child is born a sinner. Every human child is doomed to spend eternity in hell. The most important thing we parents can do is bring our children to Christ. We do that when we baptize them and Jesus works that miracle.

And he worked that miracle for us. It's not just our children who are sinners. We're all selfish sinners by nature. We could spend hours this morning analyzing all the ways that sin comes out in our lives. We could look at our family relationships. We could look at how we do our jobs. We could look at how content we are or are not with our lives and what we have. We could play back in our minds all the whining we've done just in the last week, all the gossiping, all the angry and hurtful and prideful things we've said. It would all show that we are sinners and deep inside we know that. Don't we all have those moments when we can't help but remember some senseless, egotistical thing that we did? Don't we all wish we could relive certain situations and treat certain people better? That's guilt, my friends. We know that we are sinners and we deserve God's punishment in hell forever.

But God sent his Son to die and pay for all that sin and guilt. Jesus suffered all that we owe and then he rose. When he rose, he proclaimed that the whole world is paid for and forgiven. And when we were baptized, he promised that to us personally. He joined us to that death and that resurrection. He washed all our sin away and now, in God's book, we don't deserve to be punished anymore. That wasn't just true on the day our parents brought us to the font. It's true for every day of our lives. God made a promise. Every time you wrestle with sin and guilt, every time that voice in your heart reminds you of the thoughtless, selfish things in your personal history, remember your baptism, because God already washed all that sin away.

II.

John the Baptist baptized for all those reasons. Like all ministers of the gospel, John's purpose was to point to Christ as our Savior. But John got to be the man who baptized Jesus. Now, in Jesus' life, his baptism serves a different purpose than it does in ours, because Jesus had no sin. But his baptism is part of God's plan. **Baptism is God's testimony. Jesus' baptism tells us who he is.**

At the moment Jesus showed up for his baptism, he was unknown. John was the famous one – quite possibly the most famous person in the country at that moment. Mark says that **“the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him”** to be baptized. Now Jesus wasn't from Judea or Jerusalem. He was from Galilee, the distant northern province of Israel. On the day he came to be baptized, he was probably one of many. Most people probably didn't even notice him, although we know from the other gospels that John knew him and noticed him.

John did baptize him. Mark tells us, **“As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.”** Jesus saw heaven opened. John later says that he saw the Spirit come on him in the form of a dove, but it appears to me at any rate that Jesus alone saw heaven opened. Then a voice came from heaven and said, **“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”** Even with the voice, it's not at all clear that anyone other than Jesus heard it, although it is possible. Why did God do and say these things? To affirm Jesus' sonship. Obviously, Jesus knew that he was the Son of God. But whether anybody else there by the Jordan River that day could see and hear these things, God recorded that they happened. Every generation of Christians has heard this account. For two thousand years, we've understood through these signs that this unknown Galilean was the true Son of God.

Last week Pastor Schaewe talked about the meaning of Epiphany. This season shows us that Jesus revealed himself as the Son of God. That's something we could never know on our own. In Jesus' day, you couldn't look at him and tell that the Son of God was standing there. You would've seen a fairly typical Jewish man, but no more. If you had listened to him, you would've been impressed by the way he preached and taught. If you were blessed to see him do a miracle, you would've had to deal with the fact that he had power that no human being possesses. But without that evidence, you could not have told that God the Son had hidden himself in this man.

God had to reveal it. Jesus spent the next three years revealing that truth to the people of his day. Even though we've been taught all our lives who he is, God still has to reveal it through his Word. There is no other example of God becoming man for us to point to. Many famous American leaders have thought that the idea of Jesus being God and man was just superstition. Today, many scholars teach that Jesus being God is just a myth, like any other primitive culture's attempts to explain God. For two thousand years, even people who accept the Bible as God's Word have struggled with this teaching. This morning, we're going to confess our faith using the words of the Nicene Creed. That creed was written to end decades of controversy about who Christ was. False teachers insisted that he wasn't really God in the same sense that the Father is. Today, there are many groups – some quite large – that deny that Jesus is the Son of God, like the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Of course, we all accept what God said on the day Jesus was baptized: **“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”** But why do we accept it? Only because God said it. Only because God works through the word and he changes our hearts. If God didn't reach into our hearts with his word and change us, we would be no more willing to accept this teaching than Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses or liberal scholars. At Jesus' baptism God told us that Jesus is his Son. That matters, because only that Son of God could save us.

Before he went to the cross to do that, the Son of God spent three years preaching and teaching and preparing his disciples so that the whole world would hear this message. Jesus' baptism is his ordination. I've been using the word Christ this morning. Christ or the Hebrew word Messiah both mean the same thing: the Anointed One. Anointing was how God installed prophets, priests and kings into their office. Jesus was anointed when the Holy Spirit came on him at his baptism. God installed him into his office as our prophet, the one who proclaims the gospel to us. God installed him into his office as our priest, the one who would lay down his life to save us. God installed him into his office as our king, the ruler of the universe who conquers our enemies and gives eternal peace and safety. Jesus took up that work on the day he was baptized. It carried him to the cross and the empty tomb. Along the way, it laid the groundwork for the ministry that continues to this day.

All that is what God is telling us this morning. And who has more credibility than God? Often in this life it's hard to know who to trust. Even people we generally confide in sometimes say things that we just can't believe. But God's testimony is true. Baptism is his testimony. Jesus is your God and Savior. He has washed all your sins away. You will live with him forever. Trust that testimony. Amen.