

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

³² Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.³³ I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:29-34)

Even John Needed a Clue

“I’m gonna need more than that.” Have you ever said that? Maybe your wife was upset but you didn’t know why. You needed a clue to what you did to make her so unhappy – and you did do something, trust me. Maybe there was some difficulty at work, and you couldn’t figure out what was causing it, so you talked to co-workers in hopes that they could give you a push in the right direction. I’m sure I could come up with more examples, but you get the point: sometimes we need a clue. It’s not always because we’re clueless. Some things are just hard to understand. You know what? One of the hardest things to understand is Jesus – who he really is and what he came to do. Now, for you and me, it’s pretty hard to see it that way. We know exactly who Jesus is and what he came to do. But we’re on the receiving end of 2000 years of church teaching and a lifetime of hearing the gospel, so it’s obvious to us. But John the Baptist shows us that we didn’t figure Jesus out because we’re smarter or more spiritual or even less sinful than everybody else. I think most of us would have to admit that John the Baptist was way more dedicated to the Lord than we are. **But even John the Baptist needed a clue.**

I.

That teaches us how important it is that we received all the pushes in the right direction that we’ve gotten from pastors and teachers and Christian parents. **Even John the Baptist needed a clue that Jesus is the Son of God.** Our gospel lesson begins this morning with John the Baptist pointing to Jesus and saying, **“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”** God sent John to give the people of Israel a clue as to who Jesus was. That clue gave Jesus a tremendous head start on his own ministry. John revved up the expectation that the Messiah was about to appear. God used him to turn the people’s attention to Jesus.

But notice what John said about that famous identification: **“I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’”** John himself needed a clue! The one who sent John to baptize is, of course, God. And God explained how John would recognize the true Messiah: he would see the Holy Spirit descend on him. But why did he need that clue? John and Jesus were relatives. They were closely enough related that their mothers had spent time together when they were both pregnant. And even more than the physical connection, thirty-odd years before this, when Mary was pregnant with Jesus, she went to visit John’s mother, Elizabeth, who was pregnant with him, and when Mary entered the house, John leaped in his mother’s womb for joy because the Savior had just come in. Why did John need this clue now?

We could mention a number of things. Who remembers what they did in the womb of their mother? It’s hard to know how much time the boys actually spent together when they were growing up. They really didn’t live close to each other. John’s parents were very elderly and almost certainly died when he was fairly young. Joseph also appears to have died by this time, so maybe there wasn’t a lot of exchange between the families. John knew Jesus was special. But did he know what God had told Mary about him? In the end, all we can say is this: when the Son of God entered the womb of the Virgin Mary, he hid his power and glory as God. Even though angels had told the shepherds who this baby was, even though Jesus had pointed it out himself when they visited the temple when he was twelve years old, even though he was sinless even as a child, Jesus lived such a normal life that people just got used to him. He grew up as the son of Mary and Joseph and that’s all anybody seems to have understood until the day John the Baptist announced to the world who he really was.

Even John needed a clue. And so did we. Not one of us could possibly know who Jesus is or what he did if God had not sent people like John to tell us. That matters because we share the same mission John had. God sent John to reveal Jesus to Israel. Jesus sent the church to reveal the Lord to the whole world. But God didn't choose us to do that because he looked forward and saw how good a job we would do. In fact, if you look at the state of the Christian church today, it almost seems sometimes like God chose people who he knew would do a lousy job of sharing the gospel, just to show us that it's all by his grace. We have inherited the greatest freedom to speak that the Christian Church has ever known. How active are we as a congregation in sharing that good news? How active are we as individual Christians in sharing the gospel with others or in participating in our congregation's efforts to reach out? How many of us even fail to do that as parents? Isn't there a temptation to think that we've done our job if we send our kids to Lutheran elementary school and Lutheran high school and let the professionals take care of teaching them about Jesus?

Why do we find it so hard to talk about Jesus? Why is it so intimidating? It's not because we don't care. You wouldn't be here on a regular basis if you didn't think sharing the gospel was important. But why is it so scary? For the same reason that we needed a clue to tell us who Jesus is: our sinful hearts just don't want to do it. God created Adam and Eve in his image. That meant that they were holy and that their hearts were perfectly lined up with God's heart. When they sinned, that changed. They hid from God and they made excuses and threw each other under the bus. Their children fought and lied and murdered and were born without any knowledge of who the true God is. We are still their children. No sinful heart can recognize Jesus without God giving us more than a clue. No sinful heart can want to share the good news about Jesus without God using that gospel to change it.

That sin in our hearts is the source of all that's wrong with us and with our lives. It's where all our hurtful words and selfish actions come from. That sin in our hearts earns God's punishment with death and then hell forever. But Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That's the clue John gave us. In the Old Testament, God used animal sacrifice to teach his people that God requires a payment in blood for every sin anyone ever commits. But interestingly, the sin offerings in the Old Testament were not usually lambs. They were oxen and bulls and other animals. The major sacrifice that used a lamb was the Passover. That taught a different lesson: God rescues his people from slavery to sin and death through the blood of an innocent victim. John brought those two ideas together: Jesus is the Lamb who rescues God's people from all that sin does to us. He does that by taking away our sin with his own blood. Jesus paid for the sin in our hearts that makes us impossible for us to know Jesus on our own and that makes us terrified to share the good news. God has forgiven all the sin we were born with and all the sin that we have committed and we are now free. We will live with him forever.

That could only happen because the Son of God came down here to live in our place. He took on flesh so that he could stand under God's wrath and die in our place. Then he rose so that we are forgiven. Because God knew that we would never understand what Jesus was doing for us on our own, he gave us so much more than just a clue. He spelled it out for us through John and through the disciples and through the entire New Testament scripture: Jesus the Son of God is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Your sin and mine are gone forever.

II.

God gave John that clue in Jesus' baptism. In our sermon text, John talks about what he saw in that baptism. In our gospel lesson from Matthew, we heard the description of the event. It's interesting that John did not want to baptize Jesus. That was because Jesus had no sin to forgive. John did understand that Jesus was holy. Yet, he still said that he would not have known Jesus without the coming of the Holy Spirit. God had told him to watch for the clue. He wasn't supposed to figure it out on his own. John needed to know who God had sent him to point to. Knowing who the true Jesus is matters because that gospel changes our lives. **Even John needed a clue that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit.**

All four of the gospels tells us that when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove and rested on him. John saw that miracle happen. That was the sign. Why did God give that sign during Jesus' baptism? Because John had been preaching – at God's command – that Jesus would do a far greater baptism: he would baptize with the Holy Spirit and, in the other gospels he adds, with fire. What does all that mean?

There are really three baptisms mentioned here. The Bible says that John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. So it did the exact same thing that our baptism does: it washed their sins away. But John's baptism was temporary. Jesus replaced it with his own baptism just before he ascended into heaven. He commanded us to baptize all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit works in that baptism. I do nothing. Baptism is the visible gospel and it's the power of God. But even so, there is no fire involved. When John spoke of Jesus baptizing with the Holy Spirit and fire, he was actually talking about the day of Pentecost when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit on the Christian Church to give us the gifts we need to do his work. That's the third baptism mentioned here. On that day, Jesus sent flames of fire to rest on the apostles' heads as a sign of the miracle he was doing.

All three baptisms are connected by the work of the Holy Spirit. God deliberately uses the same word to describe them all. Why? Because baptism means "washing." All our sin is washed away by the gospel of Jesus Christ. St. Paul teaches that God gives us both the death and the resurrection of Christ in the waters of holy baptism. St. Peter teaches that baptism now saves us. When the water and the word are applied to us, the Holy Spirit comes in the gospel and he washes us clean. God promises that will be true for us forever. We always return to the forgiveness God gave us personally in our baptisms.

And the Holy Spirit continues to work in our lives. That's that third baptism, the washing by fire. For as long as we live, the Holy Spirit comes to us, every time we hear the gospel, every time we take communion, every time we confess our sins and are forgiven, every time we read the gospel message in our Bibles, every time we remember the promise of forgiveness in our water baptisms, and he cleanses our hearts. Day by day, he changes us and makes us into the Christians God wants us to be. That includes being his witnesses to our own children, to our friends and family within the church, and to all the people outside the church that God brings to us. John the Baptist was able to give his generation that big clue because the Holy Spirit worked in his heart and made him the witness God wanted him to be. Every time we come here, God is working in our hearts and baptizing us with the Holy Spirit. God is making us into his witnesses.

Our job is very simple: to give the whole world a clue about who Jesus is. The world needs that clue because we're all born sinful. We're all born enemies of God, who are blind and in darkness. But the gospel changes all that. And you and I are the ones God calls to carry that message. You and I are his chosen instruments to give the whole world a clue – and so much more. But we don't make it happen by our cleverness or our spirituality or our way with people. The clue itself makes it happen because the gospel is the power of God. So every time you speak it and share it, you have God's promise that Jesus is working through you to baptize the world with the Holy Spirit. Trust his promise and do his work. Amen.