



Mark 1:4-11 - ⁴ 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."

Remember your baptism!



But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.

(Titus 3:4-6)

In answer to the simple question, *What does Baptism do for us?* Martin Luther states in his Small Catechism, “Baptism works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.” No small promise. In one of his sermons on the subject, Martin Luther stated that baptism connects us to all of Christ’s saving work – the life he lived, the death he died, the blood he shed. “For we do not attain the forgiveness of sins through our work, but rather through the death and shedding of the blood of the Son of God. But he takes this forgiveness of sin and tucks it into baptism.” No small promise. So, maybe when you heard the gospel lesson for this Sunday, you had to wonder, *What on earth is Jesus doing getting baptized by John?* In Matthew’s account, we hear a dialog between John the Baptizer and his relative, Jesus. **I need to be baptized by you!** John proclaimed. John was no dummy. He knew who he was – sure he was the forerunner of the Savior, but John knew that he had been born of sinful parents and was himself a sinner. John also knew who Jesus was, at least in part. He knew Jesus was a righteous man, one who certainly didn’t seem to need this **baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins** John was offering. But there he was. Jesus stood on the banks of the Jordan River, shoulder to shoulder with sinners, and was baptized by John. But why?

There are a couple of reasons. For starters, let’s not overlook the obvious. It’s not every day that the heavens are ripped open and the voice of God booms down from above, **“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”** Something big was happening here in the waters of the Jordan River. There’s an interesting juxtaposition of actions happening: in the wake of the violent tearing open of the heavens, here’s the gentle coming of the Holy Spirit **descending on [Jesus] like a dove.** At the Baptism of Jesus, God the Father and God the Holy Spirit proclaimed loud and clear that this Jesus is the Son of God and is the promised Servant of the Lord, the Savior of the world. We heard about the Servant of the Lord in our Old Testament lesson. This is the One appointed by God for a purpose – to display the splendor of God and to **bring salvation to the ends of the earth.** At his baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus setting him apart for a purpose. The Holy Spirit was always with Jesus, but here he’s given in extra measure, anointing Jesus to carry out his mission to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. Something big was happening here.

There he was. Jesus stood on the banks of the Jordan River, shoulder to shoulder with sinners, and was baptized by John. Why? Because sinners are the ones Jesus came to save. But even so, the whole scene doesn’t seem to make a lot of sense. John’s baptism was a **baptism of repentance**, a turning away from sin, **for the forgiveness of sins**, and Jesus didn’t have any sin...or did he? Jesus was baptized as our substitute. He took all the sins of the world, making your burden his burden. Jesus’ baptism was a baptism of repentance – not repentance for his own sins, but for ours. Jesus baptism was a baptism for the forgiveness of sins – not for his own sins but for ours. Jesus was baptized as if he were a sinner, because on the cross of Calvary God was going to punish him as if he were the world’s one and only sinner. **God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.** The perfect Son of God identified with sinners like you and me so that through baptism we might be forever identified as holy ones like him.

That’s the power of your baptism, based on the word and promise of God. Even though it looked embarrassingly simple or like just a cutesy photo op for grandma and grandpa, at your baptism the Triune God, ripped you away from the devil’s dominion and brought you into his family. The Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit put his name on you – why? Because you belong to him. The vault of heaven was torn open and the



voice of your Father bellows with paternal pride, **You are my son/daughter. With you I am well pleased!** But how is any of this possible? Only through Christ and his saving work done just for you. **All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.** The Son of God sinks himself into the waters of the Jordan at his baptism so that when we come through the waters of baptism, we put on Christ – his righteousness, his holiness, his very self. Or to put it more simply, we go in full of sin, we come out filled with Jesus – a new person, a child of God.

But what happens when I don't feel like I'm a new person, a child of God? What happens when I look in the mirror and just see my sin staring back at me? What about when I'm having a hard time seeing all that God has declared me to be in Christ? You're probably familiar with the name Albert Einstein. Albert Einstein, you might remember, was one of the greatest geniuses of all time. He posited the theory of relativity, one of the pillars of modern physics. He generated the famous formula "E = mc squared". He won a Nobel Prize for physics and was a pioneer in the field of quantum physics. This guy was no intellectual lightweight. But if you looked at him, he seemed like just any other guy – not a very schnazzy dresser and in some pictures of him, you might assume he didn't even own a hairbrush. He certainly didn't look like one of the most profound minds in the history of humankind. One day, Albert Einstein was taking a walk, which was often his quiet time for thought and theorizing, and he passed by a hotel. A wealthy traveler was just arriving, saw Einstein, and thought he was the bellboy. He said, "Bellboy, take these bags up to my room, and don't scratch the suitcases." So, Einstein did it. The wealthy traveler gave Albert a tip and some unsolicited advice. He said, "Son, you are too old to be a bellhop. You should go back to school and learn a vocation." So, Einstein took the tip and went on his way, and continued to unravel the mysteries of our universe.

Albert Einstein didn't look like a super genius, but his accomplishments told a different story. Jesus didn't look like the Son of God, but his baptism in the Jordan tells a different story. To everybody else, you might look just like every other person on earth – just another drop in the vast sea of humanity. But your baptism tells a different story about you. As St. Paul said in our second lesson, **Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.** To everyone else you might look just like everyone else, but not to God. Your baptism tells a different story. In the Sacrament of Baptism, God intimately and powerfully connects you with Jesus and everything he's done. Consider how profound that is – everything that is true about Jesus is true about you through your baptism. His perfect life of obedience is yours. His death on Calvary's cross is your death to sin. His resurrection from the dead is your guarantee that because he lives, you live. He is your robe of righteousness that you wear in the presence of a holy God.

In answer to the question, *What does baptizing with water mean?* Martin Luther said in his Small Catechism, "Baptism means that the old Adam in us should be drowned by daily contrition [sorrow over sin] and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also means that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." No small promise in baptism, no small power in baptism. But what happens when things aren't going so perfectly in my life; when I can't seem to kick the habit; when I have a mighty struggle keeping vulgar and terrible thoughts out of my mind? What happens when the devil comes calling and I fall into temptation? When I drown my sinful nature in the waters of baptism every day, but I find out that he can swim? Then go back to your baptism every day. Remember the promise of God connected to the waters of your baptism and who he has declared you to be in Christ.



Each day, God sends you out to live to his glory and to take his blessings to everyone you meet – from each breath you breathe to each step you take. At the start of each day you have the best of intentions. But at the end of each day, you come to your brother Jesus with the fresh blood of sin on your hands and tears in your eyes, and all you can manage to say is, “*I’m sorry.*” Jesus says, “*I’ll talk to our Father for you.*” In the throne room of the just and holy God, Jesus begins his confession with the first of your sins and he doesn’t stop until he’s reached the last and he says, “*Father, all these sins I have committed against you.*” Then he returns to you and, taking your trembling hands in his nail scarred hands, he washes every spot and stain of sin away from you. He looks at you with the same compassionate look he did yesterday and the day before and then he says, “*Our Father told me to tell you, you’re forgiven. I love you my child, I always will. No go and make me proud.*” That’s what baptism means for your daily life. Because of Christ, God can look down on each of his children and say **You are my son, You are my daughter**, because of Christ, **with you I am well pleased.** *When I look at you, I don’t see how you’ve broken my law, I don’t call to mind all the times you’ve failed me. When I look at you, dear child, I see Jesus.*

December 7, 1986. It’s not a day that I’ve ever celebrated – but maybe I should. It was on that cold, snowy, December morning in West Allis, WI that this renegade child of hell was brought to the waters of baptism. It was then and there that God claimed me as his child, connecting me to Christ – his death and resurrection, giving me the very perfection he demands. I’ve celebrated my birthday throughout my life – commemorating the date that I was born as a sinner into a sinful world. But maybe I should try to put more focus on my “re-birth date,” the day when I was raised with Christ and given his righteousness as a spotless robe to wear all of my life. On second thought, maybe it’s not such a big deal that I’ve never gone crazy celebrating December 7, my baptismal date. Because of the baptism of Jesus and the connection made to him in my own baptism, every single day is December 7, 1986. Every single day, you and I get to live and move and have our entire being in Christ – the one came to identify with us sinners, so that we sinners could become the very righteousness of God. Every single day, we get to live with a life that’s not our own and won’t ever be taken away from us! Remember your baptism, when God’s name was spoken over you, connecting you to Christ, making you a child of heaven *In the name of the Father and of the Son (+) and of the Holy Spirit.*

Amen.

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

(Jude 24-25)