

The First Sunday after Epiphany - The Baptism of Our Lord

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Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church

Farmington, NM

Mark 1:4-11 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 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. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

"Why'd He Do It?"

It's the question everyone asks as soon as the first damage assessment is done. Why did he do it? Maybe you were thinking it last week. Why did Esteban Santiago, a 26 year old Army veteran open fire on a crowd of people in a Ft Lauderdale airport? As soon as the facts sink in, we immediately want to get some kind of explanation. Those actions are hard enough to explain.

But thankfully we have hard to explain actions on the other end of the spectrum. Last weekend the Daily Times ran a story about a new program from the Farmington Police department called Partnerships for a Positive Community program. In essence, they give out tickets when they spot citizens doing positive things in the community. Instead of fines or court dates, these tickets entitle recipients to gift cards to local businesses as a reward for some random act of kindness witnessed by law enforcement officers. But most of the people who have gotten these "positive tickets" weren't even aware of the program before they were rewarded. So why did they do it? Why do something you don't have to do? Why go above and beyond when you're not sure anyone is paying attention? Why give of yourself without knowing if you will get anything back in return? Kind of defies our human logic about the way the world normally works. But in a good way. In a joyously surprising way.

If you have ever puzzled about people like that who do things like that, you are on your first step toward understanding the baptism of Jesus recorded in Mark chapter one. People like us who are in church get Jesus. Or at least we think we do. And most of us have experienced baptism. So we get that too, even if we don't give it too much thought on a daily basis. But those two things together - Jesus and baptism - go together in our minds about like Einstein and kindergarten. But when we look a little closer to these words in the Gospel according to Mark, we're in for a surprise. A good surprise. A joyous surprise for people like you and me who don't always get the satisfying explanations we are looking for.

There is a lot more we could say about the Baptism of Jesus. But the three main surprises are 1) his connection with sinners, 2) His service to sinners, and 3) His blessings of sonship.

Before Mark gets into the Baptism of Jesus, we get a little background. We get a quick highlight about the ministry and activity of John the Baptist. In the weeks before Christmas we were already introduced to John. His main purpose for why he came and what he did was to prepare the way for Jesus. And we can see why John got people's attention. Not only did his appearance stand out - with the camel's hair clothing and strange diet - but everything else would have raised some eyebrows. He was out in the wilderness, taking people away from their ordinary lives and daily distractions. His message meant to serve as a real wake up call. He was sent to bring about real change, change of heart and change of mind. His end goal was to bring pardon for sins.

And we understand that. We understand the need for change. We can appreciate changing hearts and minds. It's not unusual for all kinds of people to talk about making changes at the beginning of a new year. But most of that talk, even our talk about change, misses the point.

It's no secret that the Christian worldview is a minority worldview. If you aren't familiar thinking in those terms, just think about how many times recently you've just shrugged your shoulders at the way people act or wanted to slap your forehead when people explain why they do what they do. And it's not just Hollywood and pop music, sports and politics. When you think about the way most people talk and act, it's pretty obvious they aren't looking at themselves as children of God, don't see God in charge of their lives, don't think about a higher calling for their lives.

And if you think you're immune to this non-Christian worldview or unChristian way of living, think again. There was a time when people thought of the course of their lives as a story. There is a beginning, a middle, and an end. There's meaning, message, and purpose. Now we think of our lives less like a story and more like a video game. Just think of the vocabulary we use. We want to press the reset button. We want to get to the next level. I understand not all of us grew up with electronic devices attached to our hands. So maybe you have to think all the way back to Mario Brothers or Donkey Kong. Maybe you have to go back to black and white pong. It's not just the more playful aspects of our lives either. Our deeper issues in life are framed in video game terminology.

Think about the way we approach baptism. We understand why people went out to John the Baptist in the wilderness. We all know we need to make some changes. So we look to God to give us a power up. We get stuck in spots and can't advance. So we ask God for help to get us to the next level. I can keep trying and trying to conquer the game of my spiritual life. And God is an important part of that. God can help me do what I need to do to get me where I need to go. Why do we do it? We need the power. Why do we get baptized? We want to get to the next level. Why are we here in church? We want to keep advancing, getting closer to the finish.

But all of that goes out the window when Jesus heads out to the Jordan River. Jesus gets in the water and gets baptized. And when he does that he pulls the plug on our game. He erases everything we've worked for, all the advancements we've made. Crushed. Deflated. Left sighing in defeat.

And that's actually the first step to understanding the Baptism of Jesus. The actions are so simple: **"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan."** (Mark 1:9 ESV) Simple actions but profound meaning. See, Jesus isn't like you and me. Jesus isn't just concerned with just getting by. He isn't looking to just do enough to get to the next level. Baptism is for sinners. But Jesus wasn't a sinner. He had no sin. He had no need to be baptized. So why did he do it?

When someone perpetrates an unthinkable tragedy, we seldom get a chance to get inside their head. But the baptism of Jesus is our chance to really get to know Jesus. It's not that he sits down for a lengthy in-depth interview. In these verses from Mark chapter one, we don't even hear Jesus speak. But his actions speak volumes. Without a lot of fanfare and attention, Jesus goes above and beyond. Jesus saw a need and decided to do something about it. He saw a need in you and me.

Jesus was baptized to identify with sinners. That's a big difference between Jesus looking from the outside down onto our video game lives and trying to figure out what extra health or weapons we need to keep advancing. No, Jesus gets down into the waters of the Jordan River to identify with you in your sinful condition. The one who had no sin in himself makes a connection with you, connects with all sinners, connects himself to the work of securing your redemption. Why did he do it? He came to place himself with sinners.

You can already see how different we see Jesus after getting a deeper understanding of him at his baptism. But we don't really appreciate why he did what he did until we understand a little bit more about ourselves. The simple fact that Jesus took his place with sinners, identified himself with sin at his baptism means he had to do more for you than just what you expect from him. Jesus didn't need to be baptized for himself. You needed him to be baptized for you. that's because God doesn't just expect you to keep working your way through life and move up level by level until you become a champion at the game of life. It's not enough to just do enough to get by. God demands perfection. We need more than just the bare minimum to advance. We need perfection to receive God's approval. To get that we need more than just an injection of spiritual power or someone to weaken our spiritual enemies. We need someone to stand in our place.

This past week word went out that organizers were still looking for volunteers for the Four Corner's Polar Plunge. People pick the coldest time of the year and "plunge" into Lake Farmington to raise money for Special Olympics. Anyone could do it. But not so many people are willing to subject their skin to near-freezing water for a charitable cause. To be honest, the Special Olympics are a great cause. But I'd rather just write them a check.

When Jesus volunteered to be baptized in the Jordan River he did what was not necessary for himself, but what was necessary for our salvation. Not only did he get down in the water

to identify with sinners, but he took up our cause. We don't get lots of details surrounding the baptism of Jesus. But the one we get is important: **"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."** (Mark 1:10) When Jesus is anointed with the Holy Spirit he takes on the official role of God's Servant. As God's promised Messiah he assumes the role God had given to all human beings. The role God gave to us, but we were unable to fulfill. Jesus took on himself all of your failures to live up to divine expectations. Jesus took your sin onto himself. And then he took up the task of living your perfect life and living up to God's standard of perfect obedience. Why did he do it? Jesus took your place under God's law.

There is a reason not everyone gets into video games. Some of us aren't naturals at electronic gadgetry. We don't all have the patience it requires to sit through various worlds and keep trying after we encounter obstacles to advancing. You might not even enjoy those types of games at all. It's just not you. But in baptism, you have something that truly defines you. Your baptism. And that's because of Christ's baptism. In the Jordan River we see Jesus connecting with sinners and then serving sinners. But we also hear this result: **"And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."** (Mark 1:11) In baptism we are connected to Christ. In baptism, his life is your life. Your life is not a game. Your life is the story of Christ's perfection and victory.

Your baptism might have seemed plain and ordinary. You probably didn't witness heaven being ripped open or hear any voices booming out of heaven. When Jesus was baptized he was set on the unalterable course toward securing your salvation. God the heavenly Father was pleased with this work. This is exactly what Jesus was sent to earth to accomplish. Your baptism connects his work to your life. You have more than someone who sympathizes with your weaknesses and flaws, you have the holiness of Jesus Christ. You have more than your advancements and progression through life, you have the inheritance of heaven as a child of God. You are now part of heaven's royal family. Why did Jesus do it? So you can hear that voice every time you go back to your baptism. The voice of the Father booms into your ears: You are God's own beloved child; he is well pleased with you. Jesus did it so you would have the blessings of sonship.

Ultimately, you don't need a complete explanation why Jesus did it. You just need to know he did it. And he did it for you. In his baptism Jesus connects with you as a sinner; Jesus serves sinners by taking on your sin and giving you his righteousness. It defies human logic about the way our world normally operates. But in a good way. And you get to celebrate your baptismal identity throughout your entire life. Amen.