

Mark 1:4-11 (The Baptism of our Lord Gospel)

⁴ 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.”

The Baptism of Jesus

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.”

Romans 6:1-11 (The Baptism of our Lord Epistle)

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

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My, how time flies!

1. Just a few weeks ago we were celebrating Christmas and the birth of our Savior, the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.
2. Then we crossed from 2020 into 2021 ...!

3. Then last week we learned about Jesus in his Father's house, the Temple, at age 12 followed three days later (January 6) by the beginning of the season of Epiphany, the revealing of the Savior to the nations through the visit of the Wise Men.
4. TODAY we fly fast forward almost 30 years later in time and we move in space from the little town of Bethlehem across the spiny ridge which forms the backbone of the Holy Land and we have entered the valley of the Jordan River.



There we do not find Wise Men dressed like kings, riding camels, coming from the Orient; we find, instead a sort of wild and strange man – wearing a shirt of camel's hair and preaching a baptism for repentance. The amazing thing is that the One who was born to “save his people from their sin” requests to be baptized himself! The place to which Jesus went for baptism was not a place to go as a tourist for the scenery; it was not the most promising place in the Promised Land. It is a desert and a desolate place. Jesus went instead to receive a sign and a seal of God's presence and power as he began his ministry to fulfill the purpose for which he had been born. I would hope that we are here today for a similar purpose.

What is my purpose in life?

Have you ever wondered why you were born – why you have appeared for a short passage of time here on “Planet Earth”? Are you, as some would say, only an accident of evolution soon to be lost in the ocean of eternity? Or does your life have some lasting significance? While I am asking these deep questions, let me continue. When was the last time you thought deeply about the real meaning of being a member of the church? When was the last time that you thought about the daily significance and meaning of your baptism? The answers to questions like these are found in the meaning of baptism – the baptism of Jesus and yours and mine as well.

I don't know if you caught it or not, because the translations don't make the connection easy to make, but what happened at the Jordan River in the baptism of Jesus is exactly what Isaiah the prophet had predicted and foretold. Thirty years had gone by since the birth of the

Prince of Peace and now the fullness of time had come. It is his moment to begin his ministry – to restore and renew what had been wrecked and what had been ruined. Every four years on January 20 we as a nation witness the inauguration into office of our President. It is a lofty and solemn ceremony and occasion as the President begins his service to our country. No less lofty is this Baptism of Jesus as he begins his ministry with the heavens opening, the Spirit of God descending like a dove and a voice from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” This is the Father’s way of investing Jesus with the office of his mission and ministry. It is God’s way of saying to the world, “This Jesus, my Son, is the One for whom the world has been waiting; so, LISTEN TO HIM, FOLLOW HIM, RECEIVE HIM, for he is my GREATEST GIFT TO YOU.”

Now, let’s take that thought and put it “on hold” for a moment and go to the second half of the issue. What is the meaning and significance of OUR BAPTISM?

I suspect that the vast majority of us here this morning have been baptized either as an infant or as an adult. When was the last time that you thought about the significance of your baptism? There are all kinds of MISCONCEPTIONS out there about baptism.

- Some see it as a magical, mystical act in which a person is forever transferred from the kingdom of the devil into the kingdom of God.
- Others see it as simply a name-giving dedicatory ceremony for their children.
- Thomas Huxley, the British agnostic essayist, said that his wife regarded the baptism of their children as if it were a kind of “spiritual vaccination” which would keep the kids from coming down with a far worse form of sin later on. It’s a little bit like giving your kids a DPT or measles shot – it’s better to be safe than sorry. If that is the case, we might as well package baptism up and send it back to heaven as being “defective” for there are many people who have been baptized who were certainly not inoculated against sin. Adolph Hitler was baptized, Al Capone was, Joseph Stalin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and on and on. If it does not automatically make us good forever and ever – automatically children of God forever and ever – then what good does it do?

Baptism is God's way of putting his claim upon our lives. It is the Father's way of saying to us what he said to Jesus: "You, too, are my beloved child; in you I am well pleased. Accept the fact that you have been accepted. There are no prerequisites; there are no qualifying examinations for the Kingdom of God. **Your relationship with God is a gift!** There is nothing that you can buy, beg, borrow or steal. You have only in faith to receive it; and the blessings of the Kingdom of God are yours right now. What a wonderful gift is baptism!

But that is not the end of the story. For, baptism is NOT the place where the Christian life ends; it is really the place where the Christian life begins. It was Jesus' inauguration into public ministry; and the point we need to hear clearly today is that our baptism is also our commissioning and inauguration into mission and ministry to which God is calling us right here in this place at this time in history.

The prophet Isaiah gave us the job description, the blueprint, the roadmap for God's chosen servant to follow. Jesus refers back to the prophet Isaiah when he is in his hometown of Nazareth (Isaiah 61). He opens up the scroll and he reads these words "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim good tidings to the poor, to give sight to the blind, and freedom to those who are in the prison-house." Then, with every eye fixed squarely on him and every ear tuned to listen to what he would say, Jesus shakes the socks right off of those folks: "Today these words are fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, "I am the servant described. I am the One who is the Hope of the world."

But his townspeople did not believe him. So, Jesus goes to other people. Jesus, we are told, went about doing good. Wherever bad things were happening Jesus brought healing and help and wholeness. He ministered to people whose lives were like bruised, bent reeds and smoldering wicks at the end of light and hope in their lives. Jesus offered TLC to those who needed the forgiveness and healing and hope of the Gospel.

And here is the connection point. His ministry is also our ministry. That means that we cannot help people unless we are willing to invest our time, our energy – even to the point of sacrifice and hurt for ourselves. Today, we are called to be the servant described by Isaiah – for WE are the BODY OF CHRIST now in the world.

It sounds like “mission impossible.” The Good News is that the power to fulfill this mission is not OUR power, it is GOD’S power.



When a car battery runs out of energy, the solution is not to take it out of the car and set it on a shelf and let it rest up for a while. No, it is to connect it with another source of regeneration and renewal -- an electrical power outside of itself. We need that from God, but the question is: “What’s the connecting point between us and God?” Are you ready for the answer? One of the primary ways in which God pours his power into our lives is through our **BAPTISM**. Remember the baptismal command? At the end of the Gospel according to Matthew we hear Jesus say, “*All authority, all power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*” Then he goes on to give the Commission: “*Go into all the world; preach the Gospel, baptized, teach, make disciples.*” And the last thing that he says is: “*And I am with you always, to the close of the age.*” If the One who has all power in heaven and earth is with us always, then any challenge we face is not a challenge that will overwhelm us – if we learn to draw on his power. How do we do that? **Remember your baptism!!!** Focus on the God of the covenant and the promises that he makes – the promises of forgiveness, of grace sufficient, of power for every need. Do that and you will discover for yourself that he renews and recharges your energies to enable you to do his gentle and redeeming work in your part of his world.

St. Paul gives us a powerful picture of the power of Baptism in our Epistle lesson from Romans chapter 6. Our sin has been buried in the grave with Jesus in his death on the cross. How? The connection – our Baptism into Jesus. Just as we are connected with Jesus’ death through our Baptism, so too are we connected through Baptism with his Resurrection!! What amazingly Good News!

This passage from Paul on Baptism in his letter to the Romans was the text that I used, not once, not twice, but four times! It was the text that I used on the occasion of the Baptism of each of our four daughters.

I wrote the sermon to each of my daughters in the format of a letter from their dad, their father to his daughter.

In those sermons I gave some details surrounding the events of that day; how the baptism went and who were their sponsors/godparents. More importantly, I spoke to the power and importance of Baptism in their lives. Without repeating the points I made, a main point can be summed up in these two quotes from Martin Luther:

“It’s not baptism that justifies or benefits anyone, but it’s faith in the word of promise to which baptism is added.”

“It’s not the water, itself, that does such great things; but it’s the **Word of God** connected with the water and our trust and faith that relies in that word of promise.”

Bottom line: we have received the gift of faith in Jesus through God’s Word working in Baptism to draw us ever closer to Jesus. Our calling now is to follow him where he leads us in this new year of 2021 to bring the hope of the Gospel of repentance and the forgiveness of sin to our neighbors in need of an eternal hope beyond this new year. We all know that after 2020 our world of 2021 needs the real Jesus more than ever! Epiphany means to make known, to manifest. 2021 is a new year, not for us to shine, but for us to shine the spotlight on Jesus, the Light of the world. We are connected to him so that his light will never dim. This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!

AMEN.