

"Through the Water . . ."

Mark 1:4-13

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." 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." ¹² The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him. (ESV)

I was ordained first in August 1997, I think. Many of you have heard my story: I didn't grow up in the church at all. I became a Christian right before I graduated from high school. Then I went into the Army. The unit I served in was in the woods about ten months out of the year so I really didn't go to church then very much. When I got out I went to Florida State college. I went to church in college but it was like a "college church." Ultimately I became a pastor. My first job as a pastor was right in the heart of the Bible belt, right in the center of Atlanta. I received a call so Judy and I moved our family there. I remember the first day at the church. The pastor came by my office with a book in his hand, and he said, "Hey, I brought you something. I think it would be good for you to read." I immediately thought, "This is great! This man is going to mentor me." I'm wondering, "What kind of book is it? I bet it's Spurgeon. Anyone worth his salt is going to give me more Spurgeon, or Jonathan Edwards." He handed me a book and I looked at it. The title of the book was "Dress for Success" by John Malloy. Not very subtle, but it worked. I read it. Let me summarize the book for you, at least if you're a man. Wear a navy suit, a white shirt, and striped tie and you're golden for almost every situation. Okay? If you have an intimidating personality avoid pinstripes but instead wear plaid. It softens you up some. Never under any circumstances (unless you work for the circus), Malloy would say, wear a bow tie.

I sort of mock that book, but at the end of the day Malloy is right. Different situations in different contexts require different clothing, different uniforms. Even here when you read this text about John the Baptist, we often read that with our modern eyes and think, "That guy must have been crazy. Was he trying to make a point?" Well, John the Baptist had apparently read the Ancient Near Eastern version of "Dress for Success" because he was wearing the exact thing he should have been wearing for the job that he had. John was a prophet. He was Israel's last prophet besides Jesus, of course. John was dressing the part. Remember, Jesus said that John was the Elijah to come, and if you look back in 1st Kings, John the Baptist here is wearing the exact garments and outfit that Elijah was wearing. So, John's clothing is important because it marks him as someone who has a very specific task. That's what we're going to talk about this morning.

I have two points for you this morning. It's really two questions. The first question is, "Who is John?" By John I mean John the Baptizer. Who is John the Baptizer and why did he administer baptism to Israel? The second question is, "Who is Jesus and why did he receive baptism?" Who is John and why did He administer baptism? Who is Jesus and why did he receive baptism?

First let's consider John. Who is John and why did he administer baptism? Let me read to you the first verse here.

⁴ John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (ESV)

What is John doing here? The first thing you read is, "John appeared baptizing in the wilderness." What is John doing? Why is he baptizing? Why in the wilderness? Let's begin to look at these things, and read these geographical names. We're going to see in a little while that all Judea and all Jerusalem came out, but Jesus came from Galilee. The issue here with these names is not geographical, but it's theological. The purpose of the locations, at least in Mark's Gospel, is that they're theological. What's the purpose? The purpose is, at least in

this case, is that John is doing something incredible. He's basically calling Israel to re-live the Exodus that they went through years before. If you're not familiar with the Book of Exodus, remember Israel was basically in bondage, in slavery in Egypt, and then God sent Moses to tell Pharaoh a couple of things. The first thing was, "Let my people go" like in the Charlton Heston flick. However, if you look at chapter four of Exodus there's a nuance there. After Pharaoh has resisted the plagues and God's going to do the final plague on Pharaoh's first-born son, God tells Moses, "Moses, you go tell Pharaoh to let my son, my first-born son, Israel go. Israel is my first-born, and because Pharaoh has oppressed my first-born, I will kill his first-born." So, Israel is called "God's son." If you read through the prophets you'll see that they say over and over again that the place that God is going to renew His relationship with Israel after they're dispersed and exiled is "in the wilderness." So in the Book of Exodus, what happens? Pharaoh releases Israel and they do what? The first thing they do is pass through the waters of judgment, the Red Sea. If you don't have the grace of God passing through the Red Sea, you are toast. So, the first thing they do is go through the water and into the wilderness and they are tested for a time. That's the exact pattern you see here: going through the water into the wilderness, and tonight we'll look at Jesus who actually goes through the testing. So he's calling them to pass through the waters of baptism and into the wilderness to renew the relationship with God. In other words, he's calling them to repent. He's calling them to turn from their ways, what they're doing now, and to come back to where everything began for Israel as a nation. Where that began was having passed through the waters of judgment and into the wilderness where God could minister to them. So, John appears calling them to pass through the waters and into the wilderness. They do that by way of repenting. It says that he called them to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

First of all, what's repentance? It's actually pretty simple. There's a great illustration the girls and I saw last Sunday evening. I was here for a meeting and my two oldest daughters were at the youth group. Judy called me at some point and said, "Hey, you realize it's snowing like crazy outside? There's two or three inches already." The reason she was calling me was because the truck that I used to have wouldn't make it through the snow. So, I went and gathered the girls and we got in my truck and started pulling out. We drove to 212th and sort of started to go down. As I saw other cars careening off of the road, I realized my truck doesn't do that well when it's not snowing. So, I realized I needed to turn around and come back to the church. As the girls and I were turning from 212th onto Benson there was sweet older woman taking that same turn. Did you know that when it snows you have these fake medians that you can see in the road? Well, she took a left and she turned right into what would eventually be oncoming traffic. She was two lanes over from us and we were in the right lane and there were no cars coming yet, and we could see her because we were only going about five miles per hour. We could see the look on her face when she saw the hoard of cars coming over the hill directly toward her. At that moment, what I should have done out of my car window was yell, "REPENT!" You see repentance means nothing more and nothing less than to stop going the direction you're going because it will lead you to harm, and turn around 180 degrees and go back. People asked me after the first service, "Did she turn around?" I said, "I don't know, I was in survival mode myself. I hope she's all right." But that's all it means to repent. John was calling Israel to repent, that is, to stop being dispersed, to come back to God. He says he called them to baptism, which was repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and there's nuance there in the Greek that's important to point out. John's baptism did not achieve forgiveness of sins for them. A better translation of that, a more nuanced of that would be that he baptized with a baptism that had to do with repentance "with an eye to" forgiveness of sins, or "with a view toward" forgiveness of sins. In other words, he was calling them to come back, to pass through the waters, to come out to the wilderness, and by doing this to show God that they were repentant and ready to receive forgiveness of sins. It was preparatory. So John calls them out to prepare them to have their sins forgiven by God. Now, who's going to do this? Who's going to accomplish this? That's what John preaches about. Notice what John says in verse 7.

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."* (ESV)

This is one of those passages that's often used and misused. What does John mean here when he says, "I baptize you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit"? On one hand John is saying, "There's one coming whose sandals I'm not even worthy to untie. All I do is baptize you with water. I give you the outward sign of what we hope is an inward reality." This water baptism is a sign of repentance. It's a sign that you

deserve the judgment of God and yet you're seeking His forgiveness and it's an outward sign, we hope, of an inward reality. I come and I only can give you the outward sign of the inward reality.

So what does he mean when he says, "But one comes who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit"? Let me tell you what he does not mean there. When John is speaking, at least in this context, he does not mean he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. He is not saying he will do to you what you see happen in the Book of Acts where you see the Holy Spirit come on people empowered with gifts and things. John is basically using baptism as a metaphor. "With my baptism I'm giving you an outward sign of an inward reality. With His baptism He is going to accomplish what my sign points to. I can only point to the forgiveness of sins. I can only point to a changed heart. I can only point to a renewed relationship with God. The One Who comes after me will accomplish redemption. The One who comes after me, by His spirit, will accomplish reconciliation with God. That was promised throughout the whole Old Testament. Let me read to you from Ezekiel, chapter 36. It says, "God Promising Israel Upon the Restoration." He says,

²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. ²⁸ You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. ²⁹ And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. (ESV)

In other words John says, "I can only point to the reality but there is One coming who, by His spirit, will actually accomplish the reality. There is One Who will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. There is One Who will restore you and make you clean, and He will be your God and you will be His people." Who is that? Well, one thing I love about the Gospel of Mark is that he does not do a lot of small talk in his Gospel. John says, "There is One coming Who is going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit" and then the very next thing you read is that Jesus showed up. Which leads to the next point.

Who is Jesus and why was He baptized? Lets look at verse 9.

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. (ESV)

So, Jesus comes from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Now again, when you read this, think "theology," don't think "geography" because the geography makes a point about the theology.

I made a graphic. That is the land of Israel. Remember that in Herod's kingdom at this time, he split Israel into six different places.

So that is how Israel was divided up under Herod when Jesus appeared on the scene. When John was baptizing, where did everyone come from? "All Judea and all Jerusalem." If you look at the bottom of that map, that's Jerusalem and that's Judea. So all Jerusalem and all Judea came out to be baptized by John. If you look way at the top there, Galilee, which was often referred to as "Galilee of the Gentiles" Galilee of the Gentiles, to be blunt, was the "other side of the tracks" if you were an Israelite. Galilee was where Gentiles would go to live. Galilee is where Jews who were not particularly religious would go to live. It was considered unclean by any upstanding religious, Jewish person. So that's all the way up north, and when you put them in contrast, at John's baptism all Jerusalem and all Judea came out to be baptized. And yet how many people came from Galilee? How many people came from the unclean part of town? How many people came from the other side of the tracks to be baptized by John? As you're counting, it's one. One person came from the other side of the tracks. His name was Jesus. So right from the beginning we see Jesus' identification with those who are the least and the lowly, those who are the worst of sinners, those who were on the outside of the religious establishment, those who were considered unclean. One comes from the unclean part to represent them. That's why Jesus comes. Jesus comes as a representative for His people.

Why was He baptized? Did you ever think about that? If this is a baptism of repentance, Jesus had nothing of which to repent. If it was a baptism toward having your sins forgiven, Jesus had no sins to forgive. Why, then, would Jesus need to be baptized? Jesus was baptized in order to be our representative. In other words, the irony is that the One Who would come, who would baptize you with the Holy Spirit and accomplish what God had

promised, submits Himself to the baptism of repentance that sinners deserve. You see, the whole Gospel is about this. The purpose of Jesus' mission was to live the life we should have lived and die the death we should have died. When Jesus comes and is baptized, that's the beginning. If you will, the starting gun has gone off, Jesus has stepped forward as a representative from the worst part of town and has stepped into the water in order to be baptized. Did you see what happens next?

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. (ESV)*

This is one of those places where it's hard to translate and communicate the force of the passage, but Jesus comes up out of the water and immediately coming up out of the water is met by the coming down of God. It says here that Jesus saw the heavens open up. Maybe a better translation there is "Jesus saw the heavens torn apart." Remember in Isaiah he cries out, "O that you would rend the heavens and come down." When Jesus comes out of the water, He sees the heavens being torn apart and there's only one other place in the New Testament where you read that same language, or that same wording is used, and it's in Matthew chapter 27 verse 51. That's at the crucifixion of Jesus, we read that the curtain of the temple was torn apart. The Holy of Holies was now accessible to those who would come to it through Jesus. Right from the very beginning we see this language of the heavens being torn apart because of this person, Jesus, and making God accessible. The Spirit comes down upon Him like a dove. You have to ask yourself, especially if you're not familiar with church, "What kind of person must this Jesus be to move God? What kind of person must Jesus be that when he does something as simple as being baptized as a representative for sinners that the heavens would be torn apart and the Holy Spirit would descend upon Him? Who is this guy?" Mark answers the question. Look at verse 11.

¹¹ *And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (ESV)*

At least in my Bible in the footnote it has an alternate way to translate that as well, which is I think, is more powerful. Jesus hears God speaking from heaven, He hears a voice that says, "This is my son, my beloved." It's powerful to hear someone say, "This is my beloved son." Everyone would say that, we would hope, about their son. It's another thing for someone to tell their friend or their spouse, "This is my son, my beloved." "This is my whole world. Everything that I am is right here, my beloved. And with him I am well pleased." Those words should encourage you because if God is well pleased with Jesus, if Jesus is God's beloved and Jesus is your representative what does that mean about how God feels about you?

If you're a Christian do you believe that? Do you believe that Jesus is your representative and whatever God thinks about Jesus he thinks of you? This whole passage in some sense is like the movie, "When a Man Loves a Woman" with Andy Garcia and Meg Ryan. Basically a very upscale sort-of Hollywood couple, and he's a high-powered lawyer and she's a soccer mom, but she's an alcoholic. Over the course of the movie her Passat breaks down and she puts herself in a rehab facility. Her husband, Andy Garcia comes to take her out and he says, "Come on, you're going home with me right now. You should not be around these people." The rest of the people are not up-scale people. They're like bikers and homeless people. They're all there. And she stands up and says to him, "Whatever you think of these people, you think of me." When Jesus is baptized, that's what he is saying. "Whatever you think of these people, Father, you think of me." But the glory in that is that also he says the flip side of that. "Whatever you think of me, think of these people." You see, the glory of the Gospel is that Jesus came to be your representative. It started right here with this baptism. If Jesus is your representative, what does that mean for your life? Why are you so controlling? We're going to talk about complaining a little bit tonight. But, why do you complain so much? That's how Israel blew it. Why do you get angry so much? Why do you worry so much? If Jesus is your representative and God has promised all this and God looks and says, "This is my beloved," how could you not be ecstatic about that? The answer, of course, is you have to preach the Gospel to yourself all the time. You have to constantly remind yourself of that. This baptism, Jesus representing us, is just the beginning. He also goes into the wilderness for us. We're going to look at that tonight. Jesus just doesn't re-live the Exodus, but he actually re-lives the Garden of Eden. We'll do that tonight. Think about that.