

Why Baptism?

Mark 1:1-15

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I recall that moment as I walked into a lake one May. Just the day before, I had watched the last floating miniature icebergs melting into the calm water. As the water level rose, and touched the bottom of my charts, soaking me instantly to the waist in freezing water, I wondered what on earth I was doing in this lake.

I was wading out until it was deep enough to baptize a student of mine.

I must confess, I wondered if it was worth it. Was it worth the cold, discomfort of the lake water, the mud squishing beneath my feet, the anticipation of a lukewarm shower at the camp bath house? What was so important about baptism, anyways, that we would subject ourselves to this kind of thing?

Many church practices and rituals are like that, aren't they? We've been going through some of the things that we do at church, shedding some light on why we do things like worship, pray, and tithe. So much of what we do and value seems like it is a ritual, passed down from the dusty halls of time, without the same "oomph" that it once had. Is that true of baptism? Is it simply a remnant of an older, more ritual-focused church?

If we ask any random Baptist, and I have, what baptism is and why we should be baptized, I typically get an answer that baptism is an outward symbol of an inward decision. From there, we usually mumble something about obedience, even if we don't understand it. Friends, I hate to point out the obvious here, but it's right in our name! We should have a better grasp on baptism than that!

So, what is water baptism, anyways? And, importantly, why should you be baptized? To answer these questions, we go out through the dust to the Jordan river. Miles from any city, unexpected crowds jostle each other, milling around the muddy banks of the river, listening to a madman.

He certainly looks crazy. Camel hair pelts, a bowl of grasshoppers that he occasionally pauses to snack on when he's isn't either haranguing the crowd or dunking someone under the water. Then there is a special treat for today. The crazed prophet's tone changes to awe as he notices a rather unremarkable man in the surging crowd.

This, of course, is Jesus meeting John the Baptist. And after he rises up from under the water, all Heaven breaks loose, and Hell shudders to it's foundations, because, Mark says, this is the beginning.

But Why? Why John? Why the Jordan? Why does the story of the most pivotal, central influential event in human history begin here? With water baptism? And why should we care? Let's read the story from Mark chapter 1, verses 1-15.

"The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" — "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Our first question: Why the Jordan River, in the wilderness? I think that it is because baptism claims a new identity.

John's message was that Jews must approach God on the same level as Gentile converts. In order for a Gentile, which is a ten dollar word for someone of non-Jewish descent, to become a follower of Judaism, they would have to undergo a full immersion baptism, closely identifying with the crossing of the Red Sea, and the Jordan river. This was deeply humbling for Jews who had grown up with the message that God chose them above all other nations, rather than hearing that God chose them out of all nations to be his kingdom of priests to all nations. By being out in the wilderness, in the Jordan River, John's baptism is pulling pretty hard on the strings of national identity. In the places where God first formed his people into a nation, at the Red Sea, in the wilderness, at the Jordan, now John calls people to be baptized anew, approaching God as strangers. This is what it means to preach a baptism of repentance, for the forgiveness of sins.

As we look at the significance of John's chosen venue, we see that God does not prefer one nationality, one race, one people. Nations, patriotism, ancestry, are human affectations that allow us to feel superior or inferior. Jesus' baptism shows us that every person, whether they are the Messiah, Jew, Gentile, male or female, we all approach God on equal footing. God is the global God, and he claims all people. To be baptized is to claim one's identity as one of the people of God.

The second question that I want to ask is, "Why do we care what John is wearing, and eating?" This is an interesting one, because I think that it shows us that God is telling a remarkable story.

Mark is a really short book. He uses words like "immediately" like he was being paid commission to say it. He wants fast pace, action, no wasted breath. Which means that if he spends ink to tell us what John is wearing, it is for a reason. Look with me at 2 Kings 1:7-8.

7 The king asked them, "What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?"

8 They replied, "He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist."

The king said, "That was Elijah the Tishbite."

John and Elijah share a tailor. His diet consists of locust, which cannot be farmed, but rather, show a pious dependence on God, both characteristics of the greatest prophets of Israel's story. His message, a baptism of repentance, is one of the key messages of the prophets of old.

These details show us that the beginning of Jesus' story has deep roots. It is rooted firmly, inseparably, in the story of Israel. This is no set of random events, nor is it a reaction to something that caught God by surprise. This was foretold, woven into the expectations of Israel from her beginning. John is the inheritor of the prophetic mantle, the authority to speak to the people of God about their need to repent, to accept God on his terms. His garments show us that he is the latest chapter in the ongoing, unfolding, amazing plot of the greatest story ever told. The story of mighty, creator, sovereign God, and his unstoppable plan to bring about his will for his creation. To be baptized is to repent, to turn away from any other story line, and receive a place in the greatest story ever told.

But John, as important as he is, is not the last chapter of that story. He is merely the introduction to the beginning.

Because baptism is also preparation for priestly service.

Mark quotes an interesting couple of passages, from Malachi 3:1

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.

and from Isaiah 40:3-4

A voice of one calling:

"In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

They have to do with preparing the way. Preparation involved recognizing that something significant needs to take place, or is about to happen. It is significant enough that we take the time to prepare. Notice what Isaiah says, that the high places will be brought low, that the low places will be raised up, that the path will be made straight, and that obstacles will be cleared.

We have already dealt with the high places being brought low. All people come to God on equal footing, regardless of bloodlines, history or social standing. But Isaiah talks about straight and smooth too.

Just like the heart of the prophetic message of John, this is the very heart of repentance. Repentance clears the way for the work of God in a person's life. It makes the shortest possible route between two places: our life and God. It makes a life ready. It removes all of the practices, habits, and distractions that hinder such a life. Prepared. So what is it that we prepare for?

Simply put, to be priests.

Here it is good to note that these are not the only two Old Testament quotes. God quotes, well, himself, from Psalm 2.

I will proclaim the Lord's decree:

He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your father.

This is a special psalm, because they would read it out during a coronation of a new king of Israel.

That makes this a coronation. The kingdom of God, the people of God, have a new, final King.

So why would Jesus be baptized at his coronation? Because of the mikveh, a ritual Jewish bath.

I always thought that baptism kind of just appeared, a symbolic practice. But it turns out that it didn't. It was a fairly common practice. Several Jewish practices involved immersion in a mikveh, but I want to focus on one in particular: that Jewish priests would be immersed in a mikveh as a consecration to their priestly service. (This is the washing mentioned in Exodus 29:4 and 40:12.)

Not only is Jesus the King, he is also now a consecrated priest. It is as priests that we follow Jesus example. We are intended to be a kingdom of priests in the service of God according to Exodus 19:6, and Revelation 1:6. What are priests? We serve as the intermediary between people and God. We offer God's message of repentance, encouragement, and hope to people. And we offer sacrifice to God. No wonder this takes preparation! Jesus, in his baptism, prepares himself to enter service as both priest and king, and to offer the ultimate sacrifice of himself. When we receive baptism, we prepare ourselves, commit ourselves, to a life of service, and of sacrifice.

I can hear the objection, "I believe! I don't need to be baptized to be saved! Salvation is by grace, and baptism is a work!" And you would be right. Baptism is not salvation.

It is repentance!

Consider why we should submit our bodies to the waters of baptism. Is it only your mind that must sacrifice and go without in service of God? Or will you go without food, without sleep, because of your service? Will you only offer your soul, or will your hands be offered in assistance, your feet carry you to those in need, your arms offered in defense and love? The physical act of submission, the humble approach to God, obedience, brings the believer's body in line with their head. Salvation is not merely an intellectual assent to ideas, but it is rather a life lived out in the fleshy bits of our bodies. Our minds are not the only piece of us that need to make sacrifices for the kingdom of God, but our bodies will have demands on them as well, to go places that are physically uncomfortable, to touch things that are unclean, to go without sleep, or money, or food. In some cases, to go without life and freedom, all for the sake of having the shortest road possible between us and God. It makes sense, then, that we would require our bodies to be part of our salvation declaration.

When we are baptized, we claim our identity among the people of God.

When we are baptized, we receive our place in the greatest story ever told, the story of God's creation.

When we are baptized, we prepare ourselves for a life of priestly service, and sacrifice.

It is not the whole story, but according to Mark, it is the beginning.

What about you? Have you begun? Have you been baptized? As you watch others undergo this important act of repentance, how are you being prepared, even today? What service will you offer?

In our church, we are not in the habit of coming up to the talk to pastors or prayer ministers after the service. We wrestle with our questions and the nudges of God personally, alone. Perhaps today is the day that this habit needs to change.

Do you feel God's nudge to be baptized? To begin? A commitment to identity, to God's story, to service? Please, come and talk to one of us. Have your beginning!

Do you have honest questions? We would love to talk with you, pray with you, after the service. Pastors and prayer ministers will be in the front pew during our last song and benediction.