

Baptized for Us

Mark 1:4-11

Pastor Buss

In dire need of a beauty make-over, Nancy went to her salon with a fashion magazine photo of a gorgeous, young, lustrous-haired model. She showed the stylist the trendy new haircut she wanted and settled into the chair as he began humming a catchy tune and got to work on her thin, graying hair. Nancy was delighted by his cheerful attitude until she recognized the tune he was humming. It was the theme from 'Mission Impossible.'

Perhaps that's a little bit of the way John the Baptist felt in our text for today – like he was on an impossible mission. After all, God had appointed him to be the forerunner for Jesus, the Messenger of the Messiah, which was no doubt a rather daunting task. You see, the word 'fore-runner' actually means: 'to dispatch troops or ships on an expedition.' It's the idea that God was about to wage a major military campaign against the devil. And John the Baptist was to be the vanguard. He was to clear a path for Jesus, who would launch the main assault against Satan at the cross.

And so, to carry out his mission, our text tells us that John was out in the Judean wilderness, "PROCLAIMING A BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS." You know, John must've been an imposing sight to see, in his tunic made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, wearing sandals and eating locusts and wild honey. In that kind of an outfit he certainly would've gotten a lot of attention. But there was more to it than that. His dress and behavior were chosen for a purpose, because they matched the dress and behavior of the Old

Testament prophet Elijah. You see, John was the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy about the 'new Elijah,' who would prepare the way for the Messiah, by denouncing the people's wickedness, just as Elijah had done, and turning their hearts back to the true God. And my friends, that was John's message not only to his own people, but also to you and me.

Incidentally, that's why John was out in the wilderness in the first place. He probably would've gotten a better crowd to preach to if he'd stayed in town. But his presence out there in the desert was symbolic – symbolic of our sin and shame. You see, the Judean wilderness with its wild rugged landscape and impassable terrain represents the hindrances and obstacles of our sin, which prevent us from drawing near to God. It reminds us of the human heart, which by itself is barren, devoid of any goodness or holiness and therefore an unfit habitation for the Spirit of God, until it is cleansed by the purifying life-giving blood of Jesus Christ.

Well, that's why John was out there in the wilderness, calling people to repentance – because that's what the Holy Spirit is constantly doing in our lives. He persistently searches our hearts for the sin within us. And then He urges us to confess and renounce it, so that He can remove it. Indeed, the Greek word 'repentance' actually means: 'to see something after it has happened,' and hence, to regret it. In that sense, you might say that hindsight is better than foresight in spiritual matters. But thankfully the Holy Spirit uses God's Word to give us the spiritual insight not only to daily recognize our sin and regret it. He also enables us to confess our sin to Him in humble repentance and faith, so that He can wash it all away.

As a matter of fact, that's what this day – the Baptism of our Lord – is all about. St. Mark tells us that John's Baptism was for sinners. And Jesus Christ is most

certainly not a sinner – He’s the perfect, holy Son of God. But by becoming one of us, He came to identify with us sinners. That’s why He was Baptized for us by John in the Jordan river – to show that He was taking upon Himself all the filth and grime of our sin, so that He could flush it all away in His cleansing blood. In other words, Jesus’ Baptism in the Jordan was a foreshadowing of His greater Baptism on the cross. As He once told His disciples: “I HAVE A BAPTISM OF FIRE TO UNDERGO, AND HOW I WISH IT WERE ALREADY KINDLED.” That was the Baptism He went through on Calvary, when He removed all our guilt and iniquity, by incinerating it in the fires of God’s judgment, and consumed it for good!

Perhaps that’s why, when John baptized Jesus, he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending on Jesus in the form of a dove. It was to publicly testify that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Savior of the world. Our text literally says that the heavens were ‘torn open’ – the same word used to describe the rending of the curtain in the temple, when Jesus died. It’s a beautiful reminder that because Jesus was baptized for us in the Jordan and especially on the cross, He has torn our sins to shreds and opened up for us the way to everlasting life in heaven.

Dear friends, that’s the eternal benefit and blessing He pours out to us in our Baptism, which is why John called it a Baptism of forgiveness. Now, the word ‘forgiveness’ is one of the most wonderful words in the whole New Testament. It’s taken from a verb, that means: ‘to send away or release.’ It’s the promise that in our Baptism, Jesus has released us from our captivity in the dungeons of hell. He has unlocked the shackles of our guilt and set us free! As the well-known Lutheran Commentator Lenski once put it: *“The sins are taken away from the sinner and sent*

away so far and in such a way that even God will not find them on the Day of Judgment for He has cast them into the depths of the sea!”

What a beautiful promise – the pledge and promise of our Baptism. It’s what John was getting at in our text, when he said: “AFTER ME COMES HE WHO IS MIGHTIER THAN I, THE STRAP OF WHOSE SANDALS I AM NOT WORTHY TO STOOP DOWN AND UNTIE.” In the Jewish household, it was the lowliest servant’s task to remove the master’s sandals and clean his feet. John doesn’t even consider himself worthy to do that for Jesus, because He is so much mightier. You see, in Greek that word ‘mightier’ comes from a verb which means: ‘to hold in check, to restrain.’ It’s a wonderful reminder that our omnipotent Lord Jesus Christ is True God as well as True Man. And so, He is stronger than all the powers of darkness that threaten to crush us. He’s strong enough to hold our enemies in check and to restrain them from hurting or harming our soul!

And yet, at the same time, He loved us so much that He humbled Himself to become our servant. He stooped all the way down to our level, by coming to earth to remove the sandals of our guilt and shame. He came not to clean our feet, but to cleanse our body and soul of all our transgressions, by shedding His precious blood to make us pure. That’s the Mission Impossible that Jesus accomplished by being Baptized for us in the Jordan and on the cross, when He destroyed our enemies – sin and Satan, death and hell for good. And that’s the precious gift that was showered down upon us in our Baptism.

Years ago a wealthy woman was on a Christian tour of Egypt. Everywhere she looked, she encountered dust and dirt and filth. She even saw a child playing on what looked to be a village garbage dump. Unable to take it any longer, she blurted out:

“Why doesn’t her mother do something to clean up that little girl?” The guide, a native Egyptian, overheard her comment. He reached over, picked up his microphone and said: *“Ladies and gentlemen, someone has asked, ‘Why would a mother allow her daughter to get so dirty?’ I can only tell you this – visitors to our country hate dirt, but they don’t know or love the little children. Mothers of our country know and love their little children, but don’t hate the dirt. Until love for a child and hatred for dirt come together, these children are likely to remain as they are.”*

My friends, what a powerful illustration of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ our Savior. His hatred of our sin and His love for you and me have come together in the person and work of His Son. That’s why Jesus was baptized for us – to cleanse us of the filth of our sin and to make us His blood-bought children. And all of that He pours out to us in His Word and Sacraments. That’s what John was doing out there in the wilderness, preparing people for the coming of the Lord. Maybe that’s why medieval paintings often depict John with a pointing finger. A finger pointed not at people in condemnation or in works-righteousness, but a finger pointed at Jesus, who alone can save us and set us free.

For that reason, Martin Luther said that we all have inherited John’s pointing finger, for we are to point people to Jesus. May God the Holy Spirit enable us to do that – to daily renew our Baptism, by confessing our sin in contrition and repentance; and then empowered by His forgiveness, to point people to Jesus, by reaching out with the Savior’s love and witnessing the Gospel, wherever He places us. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.